

## reading & kids

### The big-issue books

Many books aimed at primary school children are about heavy issues, but I don't think books about bear baiting and refugee horrors are suitable for kids under 5, or maybe even under 10, depending on the book and the kid. Obviously as children grow older and can ask questions and understand more complicated concepts, these sorts of books may be a good way to get into serious subjects with them.

And of course children under 5 do have sadness and confusion in their lives. It's difficult sometimes to recognise what a troubled child is going through. If a kid is having a challenging life, books can be a wonderful escape or a safe place to 'go'. They can help them make sense of what's happening to them and may make them feel less alone. But introducing distressing concepts when a kid can't process their feelings may only distress and burden rather than enlighten them. Trauma, major challenges or the death of someone close is best dealt with by parents working with professionals; this process might include the use of books that stimulate conversation and understanding (for book ideas see the reviews in the book in Chapter 37, 'Talking about Grown-up Things').

### **eBOOKS, APPS & NON-PAPER BOOKS**

The digital revolution is here, but for most people it still makes sense to have paper books to read to their kids as well, especially curled up on the couch together. That's partly because electronic books (ebooks) are easy to produce cheaply and be given away for free or sold for one dollar when they're just text without pictures, and when no royalty fees (usually 10 per cent of a book's price) must be paid to an author, for example with a nineteenth-century Jane Austen novel. Also, children's books with large, beautiful or complex, coloured illustrations are still confounding the skills of electronic whizz kids in their bid to bring them to a screen looking good. They'll get there, but in the meantime, most parents will only be showing their kids little applications (apps) on mobile phones and other screens that can't live up to the big-format picture book. It will be a different world by the time your kids are much older, though. Soon enough, they'll be teaching YOU how to read on different devices.

## weirdy old notions in books

Beware of some of the stuff in the classics. (Often old copies have been handed down in the family or found in op-shops.) You may have to change some sentences on the run, depending on your child's age and sensibilities. For some kids *Snugglepoot and Cuddlepoot's* big bad Banksia men are damned frightening, especially if there's a banksia tree outside the bedroom window. Some children will be devastated by Chapter 2 of *Blinky Bill* when Blinky's father is shot. *The Magic Pudding* has some fabulous drawings and fun expressions (we just love saying 'puddin' a lot) but requires a great deal of explaining as life and language have changed so much since it was written. Kerosene is no longer a common household item, and punching someone on the snout is fairly out of fashion as a conversation starter.

Some of Beatrix Potter is now virtually incomprehensible without detailed explanation. When Mrs Tiggy-winkle (who seems to have some sort of obsessive compulsive disorder) 'goffers' a pinny, I am unable to explain what she's doing except it's something to do with ironing an apron. When it comes to 'dicky fronts' and 'pocket handkins' (an unsanitary object for carrying snot around in the pocket before tissues were invented to make parents feel guilty about the environment), I give up. But most 4-year-olds love it, so what the hey, goffer away.

Queensland author Melissa Lucashenko has alerted me to the 1967 Puffin edition of a Doctor Dolittle book, which has the following lines: "This is all very well," said the Doctor, "but it isn't so easy to make a black man white." "I don't know anything about that," said Polynesia impatiently, "But you MUST turn this coon white. He'll do anything for you if you change his colour."

Some of it is worse. And don't start me on the lack of decent female characters in most of the older books, or the kleptomaniacal gypsies in Enid Blyton's Noddy series. You'll have to make executive parental decisions as you go.

Some fairytales are absolutely bloodcurdling and are not good bedtime reading: the real Rapunzel story involves baby abduction, deliberate blinding, deep despair, psychological torture and imprisonment. Just the thing for an impressionable tyke. Toddlers are probably better off with simple stories and interesting pictures to look at so they can learn to love reading and look forward to story time.



## more info on reading to kids

### **100 Best Books for Children: A Parent's Guide to Making the Right Choices for Your Young Reader, Toddler to Preteen** by Anita Silvey

This book offers insightful reviews of classics and also contemporary favourites in the children's lit. publishing world. Great to flick through for ideas.



## more info on teaching kids to read

### **My First Phonics Board Book** published by Dorling Kindersley

When your child starts looking at the words as well as the pictures in books, you can help by pointing at words as you say them. Let kids know which letters and combinations of letters make which sounds. This is called 'phonics' and this simple book explains it for parents and is a useful book to share with 4- or 5-year-old kids.

### **[letsread.org.au](http://letsread.org.au)**

Let's Read is an Australian initiative to promote parents reading with their kids from birth to 5 years. It's run by the Centre for Community Child Health at Melbourne's Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, in partnership with the Smith Family. From the main page, click on 'Parent Info' for FAQs, book reviews and links to libraries.

### **[thelittlebigbookclub](http://thelittlebigbookclub)**

The Little Big Book Club has monthly reviews of books for young children, divided into 3 categories: birth to 2 years, 2 to 3 years and 4 to 5 years. Funded by the South Australian Government, it now operates nationally to provide support, training and resources to parents, libraries, child-care centres and teachers. From the main page, click on your state, then 'Books', then choose the appropriate age group.

### **[indigenoussliteracyproject.org.au](http://indigenoussliteracyproject.org.au)**

The Indigenous Literacy Project is a non-profit organisation involving the publishing industry, booksellers and writers, which works with the Fred Hollows Foundation to get special reading packs into the hands of Aboriginal and Islander kinder- and primary-school-aged kids in remote community schools, and visit them and help

them write their own stories. I've visited schools in the NT that are involved, and can highly recommend the project. Log on to see how you can help – it can be as simple as buying your Christmas-present books on a special day in September so some proceeds go to the project.

Be careful of audio 'learn to read' books that may have only American accents, rather than a range.



## more info on good books for kids

### finding books for babies, toddlers and preschoolers

The best way to find out about new and classic books on specific subjects, or which are especially good for which age group or interest, is to ask a librarian at your local library, or the kid's book specialist at your local independent or well-staffed chain bookshop. Bookstore websites often have great children's pages with recommendations and age-appropriate suggestions. Also keep an eye on parenting websites and mags.

### great books for babies

**Bibs and Boots, Happy and Sad, Crashing and Splashing and Bumping and Bouncing** (also available as a boxed set) by Alison Lester

Fun words and lovely drawings.

**Peepo!** by Allan Ahlberg, illustrated by Janet Ahlberg

A copy-the-story classic.

**Noisy Farm** by Rod Campbell

Even city bubs love to copy animal noises.

**Where's Spot** by Eric Hill

Simple but beloved.

**Pat the Bunny** by Dorothy Kunhardt

A touch-and feel book with textured illustrations.

**Baby Face** series (Dorling Kindersley board books of photos)

Babies love looking at other babies.

**Black on White** series by Tana Hoban

It's believed that babies 'see' contrasts rather than colours in the first few months.

## **great books for toddlers**

**The Very Hungry Caterpillar** by Eric Carle

Like his other books such as *The Very Quiet Cricket* and *The Very Busy Spider*, this is a big favourite with toddlers. Their good gimmicks variously include caterpillar holes in the pages and an electronic cricket noise.

**One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish, The Cat in the Hat** and anything else by Dr Seuss

Terrific characters, stories, word play and illustrations. Theodor Geisel (Dr Seuss) was as close to a genius as most of us would allow.

**The Tale of Peter Rabbit** and anything else by Beatrix Potter

*Peter Rabbit* and Beatrix Potter's other books are old-fashioned English storybooks based on the imagined lives of country creatures.

**The House at Pooh Corner** by A. A. Milne (Pooh Bear, Piglet and Eeyore stories), illustrated by Ernest Shepherd, and the other Winnie-the-Pooh books

Read about the characters of the 100-acre wood including Piglet, Tigger, Eeyore, Christopher Robin and Winnie-the-Pooh.

**Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's Dairy** and other Hairy Maclary books by Lynley Dodd

Kiwi author Lynley Dodd's books have irresistible rhymes and simple neighbourhood pet stories.

**Where the Wild Things Are** by Maurice Sendak

A firm favourite for kids but don't be misled – the film version is for adults.

**Goodnight, Moon** and **The Runaway Bunny** by Margaret Wise Brown

American simple classic, much beloved at bedtime.

**Madeline** by Ludwig Bemelmans

French 'orphan' story with great simple rhymes and kid-centred stories.

**Harry the Dirty Dog** by Gene Zion, illustrated by Margaret Bloy Graham  
Excellent adventures.

**Goodnight Little Bear** by Richard Scarry  
More sedative literature.

**Guess How Much I Love You** by Sam McBratney, illustrated by Anita Jeram  
A sweet book littlies love.

**We're Going on a Bear Hunt** by Michael Rosen, illustrated by Helen Oxenbury  
Great fun to say aloud together.

**Maisy** series by Lucy Cousins  
Brightly painted illustrations and very simple scenarios. The books about Maisy the mouse have led to lovely marketing spin-offs, including a pop-up Maisy house and a Maisy wardrobe book.

**Curious George** by Margret and Hans Rey  
A monkey keeps getting into trouble when he investigates things that look interesting. Get the originals – the 'new' stories by someone else are not as charming.

**Dorling Kindersley** picture board books for toddlers  
Lots of photos to illustrate words and sounds

## **books for bedtime or for soothing night fears**

**Goodnight, Me** by Andrew Daddo  
A cute baby orang utan goes to bed and says goodnight to himself from head to toe.

**Good Night!** by Claire Masurel  
A board book for very young children about the ritual of getting everything ready for bed.

**Goodnight, Moon** by Margaret Wise Brown  
This classic is one of those deceptively simple books that has adults wondering what kids see in it. A beautiful, calming, sleepytime book.

**Good Night, Fairies** by Kathleen Hague  
All the wonderful things that fairies do at night when kids go to bed. Old-fashioned illustrations.

**Starbright: Meditations for Children** by Maureen Garth

Meditations, stories and night-time musings to aid sleep, calm a child and soothe anxieties. Designed to help kids learn how to meditate and 'switch off'.

**I'm Not Sleepy** by Jonathan Allen

Baby Owl insists he isn't sleepy, and then he falls asleep.

**I'm Not Scared** by Jonathan Allen

Baby Owl is a bit scared of the dark, and that's okay.

**My Dream Bed** by Lauren Child

**a book about how stuff works**

**The Way Things Work** by David Macaulay

A huge, fun book that explains everything from levers and floating to radio and computers. A kid's first reference book and a science book for toddlers, preschoolers and primary and secondary school kids.

**books with girl characters**

**Eloise** by Kay Thompson and Hilary Knight

A 6-year-old girl lives in the Plaza Hotel in New York with her nanny, turtle, pug and pigeon. And room service.

**Pippi Longstocking** by Astrid Lindgren

Pippi lives alone inside her home while her dad is away at sea. She's terrifically strong and has a treasure chest full of gold coins to spend. Her horse lives on the porch.

**Stella Queen of the Snow** and **Stella Fairy of the Forest** by Marie-Louise Gay

Stella is brave and adventurous and answers her little brother's questions about life as he tags along.

**The Terrible Underpants** (Yes, all right, written by me, now that you mention it)

Sort of about self-esteem, but also about perfectly shocking underwear, a sensitive hairy-nosed wombat and the always appalled Mrs Kafoops.

**The Big Milly-Molly-Mandy Storybook** by Joyce Lankester Brisley

Comfort food in a book. Milly-Molly-Mandy does nothing but trot about doing old English things such as buying a spool of thread and tending her vegetable garden. She

has a houseful of oddly impassive relatives and in her world nothing ever really goes frightfully wrong. (Look for other editions and op-shop copies of these classics from the 1920s on.)

**Dora the Explorer** TV series tie-ins

(See also nearby lists for heroines including Madeline, Horrible Harriet and others.)

## **books about anxiety and separation anxiety**

**Fearless** by Colin Thompson and Sarah Davis

A bulldog who is always scared finds some confidence.

**Little Humpty** by Margaret Wild and Ann James

An Aussie book about a camel ‘toddler’ needing, as well as mum, some friends at the waterhole (which can be used to evoke the idea of childcare/kinder/a friend’s place).

## **books on wildlife & the environment**

**The Waterhole** by Graeme Base

How a drought affects a waterhole – and all the creatures who depend on it.

**The Lorax** by Dr Seuss

A wonderful classic. What happens if all the truffula trees are cut down?

## **a book on politics**

**Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories** by Dr Seuss

Yertle wants to be king of the heap, but a turtle on the bottom says ordinary turtles shouldn’t have to suffer because of the turtle on the top.

## **a book of Aboriginal stories**

**Big Rain Coming** by Katrina Germein and Bronwyn Bancroft

These traditional stories are written and illustrated by Aboriginal people. Ask your librarian or bookshop kid-lit expert for others.

## **books on numbers and counting**

**My First Number Lift the Flap Board Book** by Anne Millard

Presents numbers and rudimentary maths concepts with lots of pictures. For preschoolers.

**My First 123** by Pamela Allen and **10 Little Hermit Crabs** by Lee Fox and Shane McG  
Counting primers.



## **books of rhymes**

'The Owl and the Pussycat' and any other 'nonsense' rhymes by Edward Lear for children.

## **Australian classics for toddlers and preschoolers**

**Snugglepot and Cuddlepie** by May Gibbs

**The Magic Pudding** by Norman Lindsay

**Blinky Bill** series by Dorothy Wall

**The Muddleheaded Wombat** series by Ruth Park, illustrated by Noela Young

**Diary of a Wombat** by Jackie French, illustrated by Bruce Whatley

**Edward the Emu** and **Edwina the Emu** by Sheena Knowles, illustrated by Rod Clement

**Horrible Harriet** by Leigh Hobbs

**Possum Magic** by Mem Fox, illustrated by Julie Vivas

**Animalia** and **The Waterhole** both by Graham Base

## **books for fussy eaters**

**Green Eggs and Ham** by Dr Seuss

**Bread and Jam for Frances** by Russell Hoban

**I Will Not Ever Eat a Tomato** by Lauren Child

## **books on going to hospital or the doctor**

**Hippo Goes to the Hospital** by Hazel Edwards

Hippo, I think you'll find, goes to hospital.

**Dr Dog** by Babette Cole

Oh, what a disgusting family Dr Dog has to treat – farting and all. A good book for preparing your little for the experience.

**Big Book of the Human Body** published by Dorling Kindersley

A book with pop-ups, flaps, wheels and 3D glasses showing how the bits work and what they do.

## **book websites**

Websites are generally no good for the under-fives, tending fiercely to focus on marketing and merchandising, with lazily designed games and info that has dubious educational value. It's very expensive to set up a good website, especially with interaction. Needless to say, the old classics tend not to have website. *The Magic Pudding*, for instance, was written in 1918. Try the museum site: [normanlindsay.com.au](http://normanlindsay.com.au).

### **Good book or author/illustrator websites suitable for older kids**

For its beautiful design: [charlieandlola.com](http://charlieandlola.com), for lots of activities: [maisyfunclub.com.au](http://maisyfunclub.com.au) and the children's playsite page at [peterrabbit.com.au](http://peterrabbit.com.au).

### **[cbca.org.au](http://cbca.org.au)**

The Children's Book Council of Australia is a non-profit group that awards prizes for picture books and books for older kids each year. Check out the shortlists as well as the 'winners'. It has info on Children's Book Week themes and festivities each year and links to book creators' websites: Click on 'Authors and Illustrators' then 'Websites' for 'Websites for Younger Readers'.