



# Why Babies Need Books

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[132](#) [2]

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Other Articles

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**Susan Straub** on using **Owl Babies** with teenage mums.

By using picture books with their babies, parents can extend their awareness of the range of emotional responses that babies exhibit. Such books also engage both parents and babies at a profound level. Child psychotherapist, **Susan Straub**, explains. <!--break-->

We know that picture books for very young children provide art to look at, stories to hear, companionship, entertainment and information. Many parents instinctively understand, and feel the pleasures of cuddling up with their babies and books. Some appreciate the compact utility contained in reading to babies. Others parents are non-readers, and need an introduction into the rich realm of picture books.

But what do we understand about the baby's experience? A personal anecdote may help us think about why babies need books.

## The reader as good parent

At two years, babies are trying out their independence. My two-year-old son Ben's favourite book was **The Story of Ferdinand** by Munro Leaf, with illustrations by Robert Lawson. He demanded that I read this story of an independent little bull many times a day. On the page following an illustration of Ferdinand gesturing with his outstretched hoof for his concerned looking mother to back off, the text continues: 'His mother saw that he was not lonesome, and because she was an understanding mother, even though she was a cow, she let him just sit there and be happy.' Each time I read that passage, Ben took his thumb or bottle out his mouth and said 'Good!' It was clear that he got me to speak these words many times per day so that we both could hear them. By rereading it often I might understand something crucial. Perhaps, like Ferdinand's mother, I would trust, and allow, my son to be himself.

Each baby chooses a favourite book and frequently demands to hear it. Why? Besides enjoying its familiarity, I suspect the repetition is akin to the practising which leads to mastery. Since the reader is often the parent, the child needs to make the reader master being a good parent as best he can. Additionally, because so much in a baby's day is out of his control and often chaotic, I think the faithfulness of a favourite book is reassuring and calming.

## A 'baby canon'?

Do all books have the power of **Ferdinand**? Is there a not to be missed 'baby canon'? Is there an optimal moment to introduce a particular book for a particular child? The quick answers are yes and no. Like many others who put reading into the lives of young families, I have my opinions about specific books, but prefer to recommend sure-fire authors and illustrators. As for optimal timing, since there is ongoing repetition of issues for all of us, we are constantly either going through an experience or trying to understand it. Therefore, older children, and even parents, like to revisit issues from childhood - such as being afraid of the dark, or missing mummy, or confronting the pains (and pleasures) of growing up.

## Owl Babies

An excellent book for babies is Martin Waddell's **Owl Babies**, illustrated by Patrick Benson. It is a brilliant encapsulation of separation-anxiety. All of us, even newborn babies, respond to separating from the ones we love, even after we learn to make some sense of the separation. But deep inside, in that baby-part of each of us, these separations are disturbing and often difficult to discuss.

At first glance, **Owl Babies** appears dark and alarming, unlike most other picture books. These baby birds appear wide-eyed and vulnerable. Is this little book going to be a nature study? Are we intrigued or put off by the birds' stares? Is it going to be scary?

The first spread does not comfort us much: it is a dark night revealing only part of a large old tree and some leafy branches. The next page begins with 'Once' and introduces an Owl Family, whose home is in a hole in the trunk of this tree. Things are getting personalized and a bit clearer.

Three sibling owls and their mother live in a comfy tree nest. However, one night, they awake and Mother is GONE. Each baby owl responds differently: 'Where's mummy?' asked Sarah. 'Oh my goodness!' said Percy. 'I want my mummy!' said Bill. The physically bigger (and older?) two think about the problem, trying to reassure themselves by coming up with reasons why she may have gone. They can think about Mother as a separate being, as a hunter and nurturer who needs to be absent in order to provide for her children. Bill, the smallest, feels only her absence. Unable to imagine life without her, 'I want my mummy' is his basic truth. Benson's illustrations invite us to sympathize with these owl babies' anxious states. Bill looks decidedly stricken.

### Waiting is hard?

All three baby owls must wait. The 'not-knowing' stage is always the hardest. They cluster together for comfort on one branch of the tree. However, scary thoughts recur: 'Suppose she got lost,' said Sarah. 'Or a fox got her!' said Percy. 'I want my mummy!' said Bill. And the baby owls closed their owl eyes and wished their Owl Mother would come. And, at long last, she returns. 'WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS?' their Owl Mother asked. 'You knew I'd come back.' The older two agree, while Bill replies, 'I love my mummy!'

Is this the first time these baby owls awake in the night? Owls generally do hunt at night, so the mother owl's behaviour is predictable. But what do her babies know about the ordinary ways of owls? How were they prepared for this unusual experience? Mother Owl says, 'You knew I'd come back' but her children's behaviour and anxiety indicate genuine worry. They even seem to exhibit some Kubler-Ross\* stages of grieving in their rationalizing and praying-bargaining.

In the human world, our babies face similar separations. Despite the fun and helpful rehearsal games of peekaboo or hide and seek, or in bedtime and morning rituals, a baby often awakes unable to find Mother. In time, most babies develop the capacity to keep her alive through memory and can accept comfort from baby-sitting substitutes or a stuffed animal. Others cannot. They may feel she has gone forever; perhaps she is even dead. These babies cry inconsolably, needing the physical presence of Mother to soothe the pain of separation.

### Using Owl Babies with Teenage Parents

The Read to Me programme is a series of workshops which encourages teenage mothers to read picture books to their babies. In a Brooklyn, New York, high school for pregnant and parenting teens, there is an on site daycare centre for their babies of 3-24 months. In one Read to Me session, we read **Owl Babies** aloud as a group and discussed it. The students loved it. Some remembered childhood fears of abandonment when picked up late from the school cafeteria. From their recollections it was an easy link to their own babies, many of whom cry when left in the daycare centre. Initially, they said, all of the babies protested about the separations. However, in time they adjusted to the pattern of drop off and pick up, got to know and trust their caregivers, and enjoyed their time in daycare. All the babies that is, except 4-month-old Imay, whose 13-year-old mum spoke of the acute and chronic nature of her baby's distress at parting from her. When apart from her mother, Imay wailed inconsolably, wearing out one after another of the kind

women looking after her. However, her distress ended the second her young mother returned to hold her. Only the physical reconnection to her mother restored Imay's confidence and comfort. All of the student mums linked Imay with Owl Baby, Bill. There was an increased appreciation of Imay's experience and the way their own babies coped successfully with separation-anxieties. They could see a spectrum.

## **Making connections**

Unlike the fictional owls, some babies do not jump with pleasure at Mother's return. These little ones, too angry about being frightened and abandoned to welcome her back, may respond by turning their backs on their mother, or even hitting her. How do we, the grown-ups, respond when angry? When frightened? When dealing with separation anxiety? Do we get headaches, become depressed or manic? Are we even aware of our feelings of abandonment?

We do not know from this one classroom activity what the Brooklyn babies thought of **Owl Babies**, nor if it became a favourite book that they would persuade mum to reread frequently throughout the day. But because of this little book, and its power to evoke a real problem and engage our empathy, these mothers became more thoughtful, more aware, and more connected with their babies. They were better able to contemplate, and appreciate, their babies' inner lives.

But what do we make of the owl mother's response upon her return, seeing her children so distressed? **WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS?** their Owl Mother asked. **You knew I'd come back.** Unfortunately, evidence shows us the contrary. The mother's absence causes her babies to be scared and insecure. Yet she brushes it off, implying that there is no need to worry. She implicitly asks the babies to trust her.

However, mothers do need to separate from their babies, even if it is only to take a shower or run to the shops. Teenage mothers bear an additional burden. Adolescence is a time to be in the world of other young people, not to be saddled with a needy, frightened infant. Conflict is almost inevitable. What if the Mother Owl had been at an all night party, carefree and childfree? What if she had been in the Owl Hospital for a broken wing? Does the reason for a mother's absence matter to a frightened, needy baby? What can a mother do to deal with the problems of separation?

By reading the compact **Owl Babies**, mothers extend their awareness of the range of emotional responses exhibited by their real babies to the issue of separation. In these twelve succinct, illustrated, board book pages, we have all had an enriched literary experience that allows us to better understand our children and ourselves. There is no better way of sharing time, and gaining insights, with a baby.

**Owl Babies** by Martin Waddell with illustrations by Patrick Benson is published by Walker (0 7445 2166 1, £9.99 hbk, 0 7445 3167 5, £4.99 pbk, 0 7445 4923 X, £3.99 board, 0 7445 6313 5, £12.99 big book).

**The Story of Ferdinand** by Munro Leaf, illustrated by Robert Lawson, is now out of print.

\* Discussed in **On Death and Dying** by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, Tavistock Publications, London, 1970

**Susan Straub** trained as a child psychotherapist at the Tavistock Institute, London, and then did an MA in Clinical Social Work at New York University. In 1989 she created the mother-baby reading programme, Read to Me, in New York City. She is currently the Director of Read to Me. The Read to Me website address is: [www.readtomeprogram.org](http://www.readtomeprogram.org) [3] or e-mail: [susan@readtomeprogram.org](mailto:susan@readtomeprogram.org) [4]

Page Number:

6

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