



Two Children Tell: Rebecca and Nicholas Upside Down

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[Virginia Lowe](#) [1]

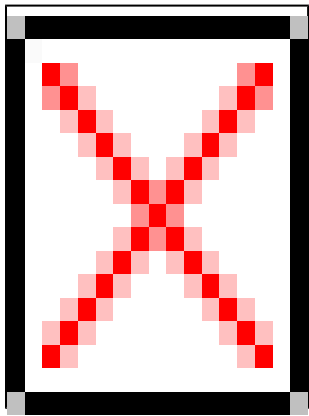
[215](#) [2]

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Rebecca and Nicholas upside down

In the latest of her series describing children's early responses to stories and language, **Virginia Lowe** discusses very young children's ability to recognise items depicted in illustrations.

In our first house the playroom was part of the kitchen, so baby Rebecca was confined to an old fashioned wooden-barred playpen, while I cooked.

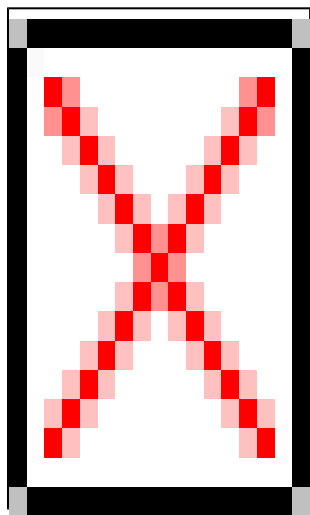


She had a container of toys with her, including a 200-page **Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes** illustrated by Esmé Eve. This had been discarded by the library, with a couple of torn pages and other wearings, so I didn't mind her 'playing' with it alone - damage wouldn't matter.

This was her favourite 'toy' in the playpen. She would sit and turn the pages (in lumps still) and examine the pictures. These were mainly black sketches with touches of one colour, and 32 were in full colour. Sometimes I saw her crawl around it, and I did wonder if she was deliberately positioning it the right way up because, from nine months (0y9m), she always had the correct orientation whenever I happened to look.

Just before her first birthday I had proof. We had come down to Melbourne, staying at Mamma's place, and there was a set of stacking beakers in different colours. On the base of each was a raised line sketch moulded into the plastic - no colour, and no indication of sky or horizon to help with orientation. I handed her the blue one, telling her it was a bear and she held it in both hands, turning it round as she examined the picture. Sure enough, when she stopped, the seated teddy was the right way up. She soon demonstrated that she could correctly orientate all the animals - lamb, dog, cat - but not the non-animate pram, house or car. I assumed that her inability to turn these inanimate objects up the right way was caused by her inability to recognise them.

Rebecca began pointing out the animals on very crowded openings (like Hale's **Orlando the Marmalade Cat**



series, with flat subtle-coloured lithographs) at 1y1m, imperiously demanding their noises be made by obliging adults. She either recognised them as animals, or as something that would lead to an exciting and noisy performance ? or both.

Her little brother could recognise pictures of wheeled vehicles at 1y1m, when he would label them ?bus? ? any pictured wheeled vehicles, such as a pram, car or train; wheels were enough. Here is a conversation between Rebecca (4y4m) and Nicholas (1y1m), with **Lucy and Tom's Day** (Shirley Hughes). ?What's that?? pointing to the wooden block truck. ?Bus? he exclaimed joyously. She then went on to point to other things in the pictures ? tree, person, doll, ball ? and he would shout ?bus? each time. She was a ?good? big sister reinforcing this: ?That's right! It's a bus!? and was highly amused, explaining to me: ?He says everything I ask him is a bus!? I was just wondering whether I should intervene, when he had had enough fooling and returned to the wheeled block truck of his own accord, carefully pointing to it, and saying ?bus? ? clearly determined to show us that he did know.

A second child has a quite different book experience from the first. Nicholas heard many books standing at the knee of the parent who was reading to his sibling, consequently he was looking at the book upside down. The elder child does not experience this, as they're always read to on or beside the parents' lap. So it is not surprising that Nick was 1y8m before he thought of orientating his books correctly.

He had also had books among his toys, but where Rebecca had spent some time every day in the playpen Nicholas had the run of the new house, and Rebecca's fascinating activities to watch, so very seldom chose to look at books alone. In fact once he was truly mobile we put Rebecca (4y3m) back into the playpen ? setting it up with a small table, her pencils, paper and scissors. She came and went by climbing over, and Nick could watch her without interfering.

At the time there was debate among theorists of children's literature about how much children could identify in pictures, some even claiming that they could not recognise anything until they were 1y6m. In fact, one psychologist couple kept their child from seeing any pictures (the ultimate in deprivation, to my eyes) and then discovered that the child could name pictures of anything familiar at almost 1y6m. Psychologists have now tested infants, and discovered that they can recognise pictures of their mother before three months.

Nicholas demonstrated his recognition of a face at six months. Playing on the bed, he suddenly stopped and stared fixedly at the cereal box on the bedside table. When we brought it down for him, he completely ignored the other interesting aspects of it ? the torn top, the white flaky contents ? and just concentrated on the large face of a baby. Then, as he was in the habit of doing with obliging adults at the time, he attempted to insert his finger into the pictured mouth, scratching at it with his forefinger ? without the demanding cry that an actual person refusing to allow entry would inspire, but clearly recognising it as a mouth.

Children recognise pictures, and can often position them the correct way too, when very tiny.

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. She is the proprietor of [Create a Kids' Book](#) [3], a manuscript assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops, interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and

produces a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children's literature generally. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two Children Tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978-0-4153-9724-7, £29.99 pbk).

Books mentioned:

Mother Goose Nursery Rhymes, Esmé Ee

Orlando the Marmalade Cat Buys a Farm, Katherine Hale

Lucy and Tom's Day, Shirley Hughes

Page Number:

20

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