

Celebrating Poetry

There are an endless number of hidden benefits in exposing children to a diverse selection of poetry at an early age. Reading poetry aloud with your children helps them fall in love with words and gives them the tools they need to become enthusiastic readers. By emphasizing the sound and rhythm of language, poetry builds children's phonemic awareness, or sensitivity to the smallest sounds of speech, laying a foundation for beginning reading. Also, poets' inventive, skillful use of language introduces children to new vocabulary words and concepts.

Poetry celebrates the individual word, the sound of language, and the rhythm of language in a way that narrative does not. A poem can be a fun, short, tasty morsel to share with children. Introducing very young children to poetry exposes them to the sounds and rhythms of language, piquing interest in words and learning to read. For older children, poetry is a great vehicle for learning how complex thoughts, humorous ideas, deep emotions, or entire narratives can be expressed with a few carefully chosen words. Poetry is also part of cultural identity and one's shared culture – just try to count how many times you've heard references to "Humpty Dumpty" or "Jabberwocky."

Your baby, toddler, or preschooler will appreciate the bouncy, playful sounds of rhyming poems, even if they don't understand what the words mean. Your kindergartener or first-grader will be tickled by funny poetry, and your second or third-grader will be fascinated by the way poets use words to create vivid images. Children's librarians frequently use poetry to get children excited about books and reading. Find insight, tips and recommended reads to help connect your family with poetry below.

- Expose children to poetry simply by reading it aloud and emphasizing the rhymes or the sounds of the words. This provides them with an easy way to interact with the rhythm and enjoy the sounds of the language. With older children, introduce different kinds of poetry, such as anthologies, concrete poems, narrative poems, and humorous poems. Show them what poetry can be about—color, nature, dragons, mice, a corn field, or anger. Look at different illustrators' interpretations of the same poem: for example, Jan Brett's and James Marshall's versions of Edward Lear's "The Owl and the Pussycat." Compare and contrast the two books, even focusing on one small aspect, such as the "pea-green boat."
- Make an exclusive poetry section in your home library or on a specific bookshelf so that kids will know where to find a variety of poetry books. For older kids, let them organize the area to meet their needs or interests.
- For the very youngest ages, choose playful, rhyming poetry about topics that are familiar and of interest to children. Kindergartners and first-graders really enjoy humorous poems about topics they can relate to. Begin to show children at these ages that poetry does not always rhyme, but also make sure that beginning readers are exposed to plenty of rhyming poetry to help them build phonemic awareness as they begin to read.
- In second and third grades, broaden kids' of what poetry can be. Introduce them to anthologies of poetry about a single topic, such as "The Dragons Are Singing Tonight" by Jack Prelutsky, a book of poems all about dragons. Show them concrete poetry, or poems that are designed to look like what they are about, by sharing collections such as Joan Bransfield Graham's "Flicker Flash." It's often helpful to introduce children to poetry that might inspire them to write their own verse, such as haiku and acrostic poems. Leslie Evans' "Winter: An Alphabet Acrostic" is a collection that shows children how rich acrostics can be. Longer narrative poems that tell an entire story, such as Vera B. Williams' "Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart," are appropriate for this age group as well.

Recommended Poetry Books for Young Readers:

1. Around the World in Eighty Poems by James Berry

See the world from the comfort of your own home! This collection of poems spans the globe, containing selections from more than 50 countries. The poems cover many topics and formats and appeal to a broad age range. Soft pastel illustrations accompany each poem.

2. Flicker Flash by Joan Bransfield Graham

This unique book of poems is sure to light up your bookshelf. A collection of concrete or shape poems about light, each poem is shaped like a different light source and celebrates that particular form of light. From “Sun” to “Spotlight” to “Birthday Candles,” these poems will intrigue adults and children alike.

3. A Bad Case of the Giggles Edited by Bruce Lansky

Lansky’s selection of outrageous poems is laugh-out-loud worthy. Featuring popular children’s poets such as Shel Silverstein, Jack Prelutsky, Judith Viorst, and Jeffrey Moss, this hilarious anthology is packed with poems about the yuckiest, muckiest, least-luckiest topics! Illustrations by Stephen Carpenter bring these peculiarly pesky poems to life.

4. Dirt on My Shirt by Jeff Foxworthy

Comedian Jeff Foxworthy channels his inner-kid to bring you a lighthearted collection of family-friendly (and family-frenzied) poems. Also available in an “I Can Read” series format, this book is wonderful for and accessible to all kids, young and old. The illustrations are purposely messy and humorous, a perfect addition to the poetry.

5. Commotion in the Ocean by Giles Andreae

With this sequel to the best-selling, “A Rumble in the Jungle,” Andreae hits home again. Colorful and bright, this bubbly book of poems speaks to the deep-sea diver in all of us. Explore the ocean floor and meet all of its creatures swimming through the pages.

6. The Carnival of the Animals by Jack Prelutsky

Prelutsky introduces children to the wonder of classical music in his adaptation of Camille Saint-Saens’s “The Carnival of the Animals.” Rewritten verses and art by illustrator Mary GrandPre make this CD-accompanied collection a great way for small children to interact with poetry in an enjoyable way.

7. Joyful Noise by Paul Fleischman

This unique and refreshing collection of poems about insects is designed to be read by two people, optimizing reader interaction. Each page contains two columns of alternating text, one for each reader, along with small, unobtrusive illustrations.

8. Everything on It by Shel Silverstein

Silverstein’s works are often remembered for wacky wordplay, simple stick-figure drawings and outrageous rhymes. This posthumous collection of poems sticks to the poet’s true form as he paints pictures of “toilet-paper trolls” and “growing down” for kids everywhere. This book is sure to be a staple of any bookshelf.

9. Haiku Baby by Betsy Snyder

In just 17 syllables, the simplest joys in the lives of babies are beautifully captured. Follow along as a bluebird experiences the simple pleasures of outdoor life. The board book format with tabs encourages little fingers to turn pages and adore Snyder’s greeting card-like illustrations.

10. Hip Hop Speaks to Children: A Celebration of Poetry with a Beat by Nikki Giovanni

Giovanni has created a work of art in which children are encouraged to explore poetry. Featuring incredible artwork, a message from Martin Luther King Jr. and an accompanying CD, this collection goes above and beyond to connect spoken word to written word via rhythm and African-American poetry. Look, listen and learn – you won’t want to miss a minute of this New York Times Best Seller.