

Reading children a bedtime story will help to nurture a lifelong love of books, says **Andrea Li**

# Words to the wise

Alice Wong considered herself an avid reader, but it didn't occur to her that she might have to learn how to read to her two young children. She was even less aware that courses were available to teach this skill.

"I never used to understand the power of reading," says Wong, who has a four-year-old son and a two-year-old daughter.

"My husband and I would read to our kids, but it was part of a monotonous routine, a five-minute session at the end of the day if we weren't too tired. It was something to get over and done with."

Taking part in a reading workshop run by the literacy advocacy group Bring Me a Book Hong Kong last year completely changed her outlook.

"It taught me so many new

things about reading and how books can be used as a tool to help expand children's vocabulary and general knowledge," she says.

Like Wong, a growing number of parents in Hong Kong are catching on to the benefits of reading aloud to their preschoolers.

Bring Me A Book Hong Kong, which runs regular workshops to help parents understand the importance of reading aloud, reports attendance has nearly tripled since 2008, with more than 2,000 people signing up last year.

Similarly, the number of schools taking part in the HKEdCity Parent Reading Ambassadors programme, a scheme that reaches parents through primary schools, doubled over the past seven years to more than 100 in the last academic year.

Educators and researchers cite a



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CHILDREN'S AUTHOR MIO DEBNAM

host of benefits that can result from effective reading to children by their parents. Children who have been read to from a young age are more likely to cultivate and sustain a lifelong passion for reading and, in turn, perform better in their academic studies.

"They can demonstrate a better transfer of knowledge and flexibility in learning," says Emma Navin, principal of the English Schools Foundation International Kindergarten in Wu Kai Sha.

Wong can bear that out. Her improved read-aloud skills have had a

remarkable effect.

Exploring a book together has not only brought her children closer, but both youngsters are

more articulate, have a better grasp of vocabulary and are far more enthusiastic about reading.

What's more, she says, they can focus better and for longer.

But effective reading isn't simply about sitting together in front of a book. What counts most is the way parents read to the child.

"It is so very important to make the reading experience cosy and personal," says Dr Sandra Lee, a lecturer at the National Centre for Montessori Education in the United States. "Pay close attention to the child's reactions. Parents should not be like a reading machine."

The pace of reading should be set by the youngster.

"If the child wants to look at, or talk, about one picture for 10 minutes or read a passage three times over, go with the flow," advises



Alice Wong reads to her two children





**Jin Shang-fung of the Taiwan Hsin Yi Foundation runs a parent-child reading workshop hosted by the charity Bring Me a Book. Photo: David Wong**

children's author Mio Debnam. "Paraphrase or precis the story if they look as if they are getting bored.

"When reading aloud to your child, read it like you are an Oscar-winning actor. Use different voices.

"Vary your tone and pacing to match the story. Make something scary more suspenseful with your voice. Read it with feeling, and have fun together."

Mum and Dad should enjoy the experience equally, says Debnam, who is the regional adviser for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators.

In a city where competition to get into primary schools is intense, parents unconsciously turn reading sessions with the children into something of a quiz, educators say. They warn that this could do more harm than good.

"If taken to an extreme, there is a danger the child will lose interest in reading. If they feel it is yet another form of assessment, they will find it boring," says Professor Catherine McBride-Chang of Chinese University's psychology department. McBride-Chang specialises in early literacy skills.

It is better to concentrate on fostering a love of reading from birth by providing a non-judgmental environment. A child who feels comfortable in expressing himself or herself can thrive, she says.

A study she conducted in Hong Kong three years ago shows the effectiveness of an interactive reading approach.

McBride-Chang examined the vocabulary of kindergarten children engaged in dialogic reading. This is a technique that uses the book as a focal point to initiate discussion. Their vocabulary increased about 10 per cent more than their peers who were read to in a traditional manner over an eight to 12-week period.

"This technique encourages parents to ask as many open-ended questions about the book as possible, and even to get the child to retell the story in his or her own words. This approach gets the child

talking far more than if they were just being quizzed. It also encourages creativity and makes the reading of the same book more interesting," she says.

Once parents drop their expectations, the pressure on the child is reduced. Then the children can really start to appreciate reading. Consequently, they become far more likely to gravitate towards reading on their own.

Reading techniques aside, educators say it is important to choose material that children will enjoy rather than simply that which is deemed correct.

"For small children, it really doesn't matter whether you are reading comics or fairy tales," says Marie Murphy, head of languages at ESF Educational Services. "The point is to find something that can grab their attention. If you can do that, the passion for reading will come." Lee agrees. Parents should also refrain from choosing books that are too educational or difficult and instead select those that relate to children's daily lives, she says.

"I used to read to my daughter with the aim of wanting to improve her academic abilities," says Alice Choi, a manufacturing executive who makes reading to her 2½-year-old daughter a daily ritual.

"But the Bring Me a Book seminar helped me understand that it doesn't matter what type of book we read. It is far more important to cultivate the habit of reading books she enjoys, and from there the knowledge will come naturally."

As the range of suitable books expands for her toddler, Choi says the broader challenge lies in finding materials quickly enough to keep up with her daughter's curiosity and pace of development.

"She might become bored if the book is too easy or get turned off if it is too difficult," she says. "It is a process of trial and error. The trick seems to be to know when to stop reading a book and when to introduce it again."

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# Chinese writers begin to see the big picture

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For decades, Chinese-language children's picture books were mostly translations of Western works. But that's changing as Chinese writers and illustrators begin to create quality works of their own that are fuelling a new and fast-evolving industry.

"There is still a dearth of original Chinese-language children's picture books. But a growing number of publishers, writers and illustrators, particularly in China, are seeing this shortage as an opportunity," says Sandra Lee, a US-based expert in child education and a former judge for the Feng Zikai Chinese Children's Picture Book Awards.

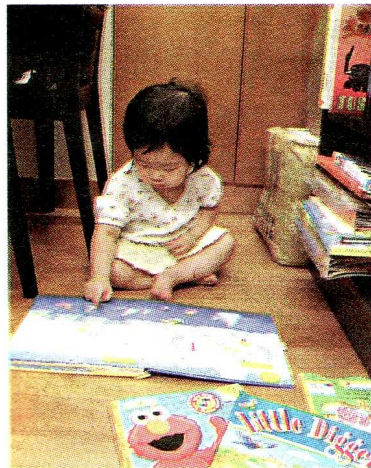
Set up by the Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation in 2008, the independent award aims to promote production and distribution of quality Chinese children's picture books.

It is named after prominent mainland illustrator, the late Feng Zikai, and recognises the achievements of both writers and illustrators of children's picture books. The illustrator/writer of the winning book receives a top prize of US\$20,000 and is guaranteed a print run of 3,000 copies.

The discrepancy in standards of English and Chinese-language book markets is due in part to cultural differences. Chinese parents tend to think picture books are not as important because they lack a strong educational dimension, says Lee Su Hwei, founder of child literacy charity Bring Me A Book Hong Kong and a board governor of the Feng Zikai award.

"Chinese parents have not traditionally placed any emphasis on picture books because there has been such a focus on rote learning in schools. In fact, parents in the past thought the more words the better," says Lee Su Hwei.

But that attitude has been shifting as parents realise that early literacy does not just mean being



Alice Choi's daughter, Nathalie, enjoys a picture book (above); award-winning Chinese picture books *A New Year's Reunion* (below), by Yu Liqiong, and *The Day Vegetables Became Goblins* (bottom), by Zhou Xiang



able to read the written word. It also encompasses other important processes such as stimulating creativity and nurturing an appetite for learning.

"Parents want to teach their kids to read, but we take the message further by telling them you can read to learn. Reading is about lifelong learning," Lee Su Hwei says.

The Feng Zikai award has changed the public perception of Chinese picture books. It has raised standards and encouraged the production of more books. "The talent is definitely there. It is a case of investing in it," Lee Su Hwei says.

*A New Year's Reunion*, written by Yu Liqiong with illustrations by Zhu Chengliang, has garnered notable success since it won the 2009 award. It has had three reprints and has been translated into English by British publisher Walker Books.

"I think the winner of the first Feng Zikai award helped set a standard for illustration and writing. This has been used as a guideline for others," says Sandra Lee.

Even so, she says Chinese writers and illustrators must be mindful not to overwhelm their young readers when incorporating cultural and language elements into children's literature. "Writers and illustrators sometimes forget to put themselves in the child's shoes, or make the assumption that they know best."

Sandra Lee is in Hong Kong to give talks for Bring Me A Book's summer reading campaign, Cuddle and Chuckle with Books, which is held in collaboration with the Hong Kong Public Libraries with activities held in 10 district libraries and other venues. The programme, which includes storytelling sessions, reading workshops, talks, and a touring exhibition of winning works in the 2009 Feng Zikai awards, is a step towards realising their dream of fostering a children's literary festival, says Pia Wong, executive director of Bring Me A Book Hong Kong.

"We aim to ignite a passion for reading among families in Hong Kong. ... Hopefully it will be passed on to future generations to come." familypost@scmp.com

For details about the Cuddle and Chuckle with Books programme, visit

[www.bringmeabook.org.hk](http://www.bringmeabook.org.hk)

From Wonder to Wisdom: Parents talk by Sandra Lee, on how children's books change lives. Jul 22, 6pm-8pm, 8/F, Extension Activity Room, City Hall Public Library

Feng Zikai Chinese Children's Picture Book Exhibition, Jul 17 to Aug 15, Central Library Exhibition Gallery

## BEDTIME READS TO FIRE UP THE IMAGINATION

Loved for their relevant and engaging storylines, vibrant illustrations and age-appropriate text, these English-language children's picture books are recommended by reading experts and kindergarten teachers:

### Goodnight Moon

by Margaret Wise Brown

A bedtime classic, *Goodnight Moon* is a short poem in which a young rabbit

### Where the Wild Things Are

by Maurice Sendak

Enjoyed by adults and kids for its magnificent illustrations and easily read text, the book revolves around Max, who is sent to bed early but discovers a forest has sprouted in his room, sending him on a wild journey.

### The Very Hungry Caterpillar

by Eric Carle