
FEATURE

Fathers in picture books: Role models matter

After a quick scan of her classroom library and the books she offers children, Ms. Ross asks for a bit of time at the program's weekly teacher meeting to discuss the lack of books featuring strong, positive relationships between children and their fathers. She asks about books in other classrooms and gets responses like this:

"We only have books with animals."

"The children haven't asked for anything else."

"I don't want to set up unrealistic expectations because four of the kids don't have dads."



While the roles of fathers have changed radically in the past 25 years, it does no service to children to ignore or dismiss their impact—as nurturers and as behavioral models. And while most preschool teachers are appropriately reluctant to address the facets of parenting styles with children, wise teachers

recognize the power of picture books to offer images of loving, caring, and attentive parents, including fathers.

As societal roles have changed, research and experience have also pointed to changes in picture books. The number of books published for young audiences has exploded, producing both books worthy of time and attention and those that might be a less good fit. Of the thousands of picture books in print, what makes a book a *keeper*—memorable, universal, invigorating, timely, and influential?

Choosing quality

Think about why we choose specific picture books. Is it because the book

- is short?
- teaches a lesson?
- has good illustrations?
- isn't harsh or scary?
- has familiar content?
- has simple vocabulary?
- is one you liked as a child?
- is handy on the shelf?
- is one you haven't read yet?

Of course, there are familiar, well-loved, and aesthetically pleasing books that we read dozens of times in a year. But do the choices reflect the best in children's literature or simply the ease of choosing a book that's familiar and reflects your personal taste?

In preparing to share children's literature, it's important to remember that picture books help children interpret and incorporate the behaviors, ideas, and concepts—both positive and (unfortunately) negative—that are integral to social and emotional well-being. Picture books allow children to share in the lives of others, fostering sensitivity and compassion not because a teacher says they are important but because a story has the power to invite a reader—and

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



listener—into another world.

This simple checklist may help you evaluate your selections and choose the best books for particular children and a particular time.

- Is the book **appropriate**? Consider the ages and developmental skills of the children. What do children already know and what do they want to know?
- Is the book **interesting**? Does the book satisfy curiosity and invite creative ways of addressing a familiar issue?
- Is the book of **desirable length**? The needs of children come first but sometimes you want a short book to quiet a transition to naptime or to cover a delayed meal.
- Is the book **suitably illustrated**? Are the text and pictures synchronized? Do the illustrations contribute to a child's understanding of the issue or situation?
- Is the book **ethically sound**? Does the book reflect prosocial behaviors, cooperative problem solving, and compassion and respect for others?
- Is the book **free from bias**? Are the characters and situations free of ethnic, racial, and sex-role stereotype or prejudice? Does the text suggest that there is only one way to think about an event or character?
- Does the story have a **satisfying conclusion**? Seldom does "And they all lived happily ever after" resonate with children or reflect the real world.

- Is the book **attractive and durable**? A torn, flimsy paperback doesn't encourage care and respect for books. If cost is an issue, the public library is the solution.
- Will the book **extend the children's knowledge**? Does the book invite follow-up conversation or perhaps an extending activity? Is the book one a child is likely to recall days or weeks later? Does it stimulate curiosity and offer realistic and accurate resolution?

Fathers as role models

Campbell & Wirthenberg (1980); Waters (2017); Poarch & Mock-Turner (2001); and Peterson & Lach (1990) explored stereotypes in children's literature over several decades. All offer guidance in evaluating books about fathers as nurturing role models. As you build your classroom library, consider the following:

- Are people of different races, cultures, ethnic groups, religious groups, occupations, social roles, and familial roles portrayed accurately?
- Are men portrayed as successful, committed to family, competent in caregiving, and socially engaged as women?
- Are families portrayed in their structural diversity?
- Are both men and women portrayed as active, independent, and competent rather than passive or incapable?
- Are cultures and social groups represented respectfully and authentically rather than as quaint, curious, or primitive?

The following list will allow you to answer *yes* to the questions posed. Some are classics, and some are newly published. Most have been recognized for quality by the American Library Association, the Children's Book Council, or the National Council for Teachers of English. You can preview most of the books through www.YouTube.com. Search by book title, and in many cases the author reads the text to you.

Browne, A. (2001). *My Dad*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

With humor, adoring hyperbole, and unabashed affection, a little boy celebrates his dad who seems to be capable of anything—swimming like a fish, lifting weights like a gorilla, and eating like a horse. Browne's illustrations are bigger than life, and as seen through the eyes of a child narrator, reflect the

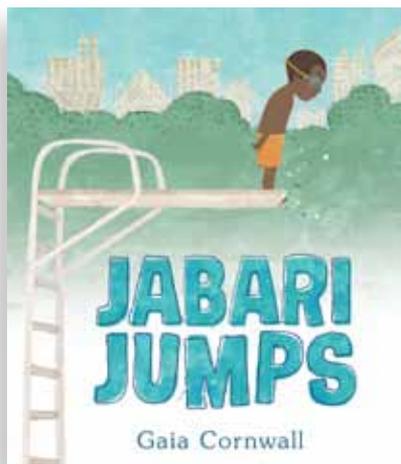
PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



awe, devotion, and intensity of the love the two share. Because the book is a product of the UK, some phrasing will engender conversation, such as when the dad plays football (soccer) and is “as daft as a brush.” Enjoy the comparisons that children in your class make to this child’s hero.

Cornwall, G. (2017). *Jabari Jumps*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.

Oh the fear, and oh the reassurance Jabari feels when he and his dad head to the neighborhood swimming pool. Jabari is set with swim trunks and



goggles, but when it’s time to show off his diving skills, panic ensues. The ladder is so tall, the water so far away, and the father so reassuring that Jabari jumps.

Illustrations capture the flying, splashing, sink-

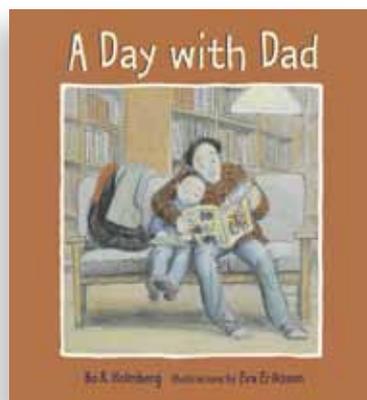
ing, gurgling, and the ultimate celebration of fear conquered with a smile, loving words, and a squeezed hand. Clear and tender illustrations and a simple, heartwarming story are reminiscent of Ezra Jack Keats’ and just as poignant

Hall, D. (1979). *Ox-Cart Man*. New York, NY: Viking.

This Caldecott Medal winner tells the story of a farmer and his hard-working family. The dad packs his cart with the wool, flax, mittens, brooms, and maple syrup produced on the family’s New Hampshire farm, sells the materials at market, and spends the revenue on the tools needed to start the production cycle again the next year. Painted illustrations by Barbara Cooney help tell a story that is historically and socially distant and enliven the straightforward, informative text. Farm tasks tend to be gender-stereotyped (the son carves, the daughter does needlework) but offer a great opportunity to explore how cooperation, skill, interest, and perseverance benefit a family.

Holmberg, B. R. (2008). *A Day with Dad*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.

Following his parents’ divorce, Tim learns that while his parents might no longer love each other, both love their son very much. The text communicates warmth, understanding, and depth. The simple pencil-drawn illustrations are realistic and reinforce the strong love between



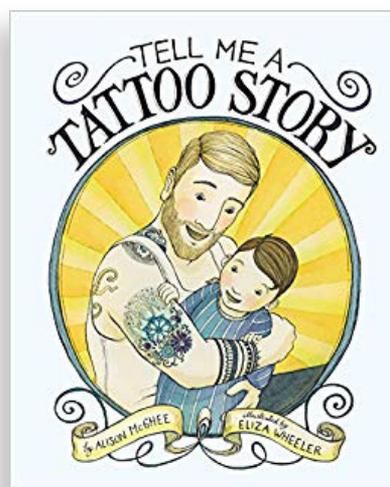
the father and his son.

Guettier, B. (1999). *The Father Who Had 10 Children*. New York, NY: Dial Books for Young Children.

First published in France, this book is quirky, cartooned, and endearing. The devoted father washes, feeds, transports, and kisses his wee ones until he’s too tired to do more. A vacation is what he seeks—an escape from the 10 little ones. But predictably, his sailing adventure is cut short. He returns home, collects his 10 little sailors, and sets out again with family intact—exhausted and content.

McGee, A. (2016). *Tell Me a Tattoo Story*. New York, NY: Chronicle Books.

This trendy and touching story connects a boy to his family history through his father’s tattoos. The

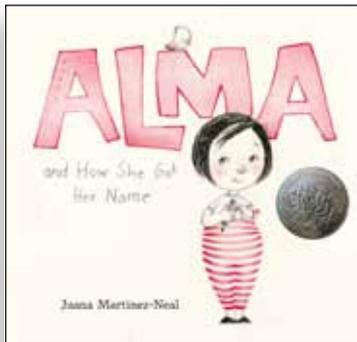


dad, we can understand, is often asked to recall the stories behind the inked images of a dragon, the motto ‘Be kind,’ his military service, and even the tiny heart that he had drawn to celebrate the birth of his son. Eliza Wheeler’s art-

work complements the story perfectly.

Martinez-Neal, J. (2017) *Alma and How She Got Her Name*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.

Alma Sofia Esperanza José Pura Candela thinks her name is too long—it doesn't fit. Her father introduces her to all the family members she's named



after. Page by page, the child learns about her family and recognizes herself in each of their stories—the activist, the traveler, the book- and flower-lover; but there is no ancestor named Alma. When she asks her dad

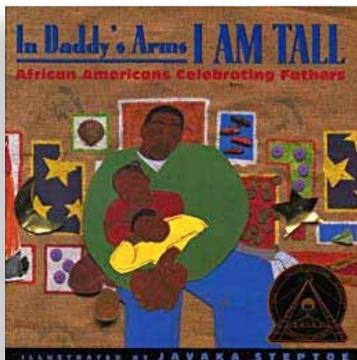
about it, he tells her that he gave her that name—the only Alma who will have her own story to tell. Illustrations feature colored-pencil highlights that produce a soft visual texture that complements the straightforward yet loving text.

Soosh. (2018). *Dad by My Side*. New York, NY: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.

Illustrator and storyteller Soosh makes Dad bigger than life, especially in the eyes of his tiny young daughter. Watercolor drawings quiet the outlandish adventures of the invincible father-daughter duo—playing, working, cooking, exploring, comforting, teaching, cuddling, and protecting. What more could a child need from a dad?

Step toe, J. (2013). *In My Daddy's Arms I Am Tall: African Americans Celebrating Fathers*. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books.

This collection of poems—by both old and contemporary African-American writers—is vitalized with



the moving illustrations of Javaka Steptoe. He is the son of award-winning children's book illustrator John Steptoe (*Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters; The Story of Jumping Mouse, The Colors of the Race, and Thank You, Jackie Robinson,*

among others). While these poems celebrate all fatherhood, the book is a special testament to the bond and lineage of these two celebrated illustrators.

Thompson, L. (2007). *The Apple Pie That Papa Baked*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Like the familiar cumulative story "The house that Jack built," Thompson describes a loving father that bakes a succulent treat for his daughter. The black ink illustrations are highlighted with yellow and apple red—primitive, elegant, and effective. Children will most appreciate being able to recite the text while learning about apple trees, baking, and farm orchards. The affection shared is matter-of-fact and grounded—even with apple pie.

Yaccarino, D. (2007). *Every Friday*. New York, NY: Holt.

A young boy and his dad have a date for breakfast every Friday. The weekly ritual—carved out of the hustle of city life—allows time for checking in with



neighborhood dogs, watching the construction of a new building, and enjoying the weekly stack of pancakes. Yaccarino describes the book as nonfiction as it describes the ritual he and his preschool son faithfully celebrate.

Illustrations are painted in gouache. Although the styles (including the father's hat and the city's vehicles) look a bit dated, the simple and non-saccharine story will resonate.

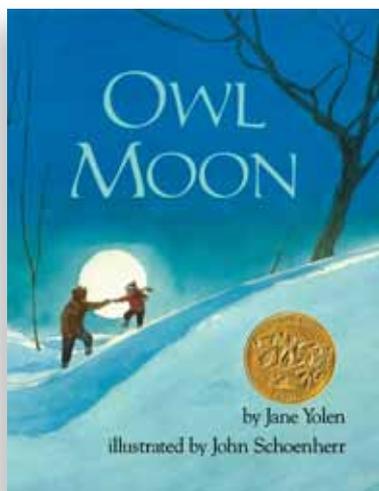
Yolen, J. (2010). *My Father Knows the Names of Things*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

In this simple, poetic tale, a girl sings the adoration she feels for her father. Love and companionship are expressed in every spread—from naming insects to seven shades of blue. Although the rhyme

is a bit uneven for young children, the celebration of this nurturing father is real.

Yolen, J. (1987). *Owl Moon*. New York, NY: Philomel.

In quiet, respectful tones that are almost poetic, Yolen tells the story of a girl and her father who go



owling. Through a snowy field and into the woods, they trudge. As they wait, the adventure is almost magical, and the anticipated swoop of the snowy owl reaffirms a child's trust in a parent who can show the way. *Owl Moon* won the Caldecott Medal in 1988.

Watercolor illustrations by John Schoenherr enrich the story and invite stilled anticipation.

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Resources about children's literature

Booklist is the review journal of the American Library Association (www.ala.org).

Horn Book Magazine (www.hbook.com) contains reviews of books, articles about literature, and interviews with authors.

School Library Journal (www.slj.com) provides news, information, and reviews; the December issue includes an index and a Best Books section. ■