

Reading to your kids: Are apps creating gaps?

By David R. Altman
Books & Writers Editor

As we sat side-by-side on our comfortable old sofa, my six-year-old granddaughter Milly had her eyes glued to the big book that we had spread across our laps.

Her attention was captivated far more than the Barbie App she was playing on my iPad just before dinner (yes, like many grandfathers, I have Barbie apps on my phone, not to mention Talking Ginger, KidsDoodle, Itsy Bitsy Spider and about 15 others that my grandkids use from time-to-time).

But it's the book she now wants, not the Apps.

"Will you read this story to me Grampa?" she says, eyes hoping for a "yes" and already moving toward the place we now sit and begin to share the book together (she assumes, correctly, that the answer is always, unconditionally, "yes").

So we begin with our latest book, *House Held Up by Trees*, a wonderful story by the poet and artist Ted Kooser (a former U.S. poet laureate and one of the great contemporary poets of our time).

The book, illustrated by Jon Klassen, is, like all truly great children's books, remarkable for both the reader and the child—the intertwined lessons about life and nature enjoyed and understood (differently) by everyone who opens it.

The book is about a small house near the woods, shared by a father and his two children—and what happens to the house over time, after the children move away and the father puts the house up for sale. It's a beautiful story, and not one that is lost on my granddaughter.

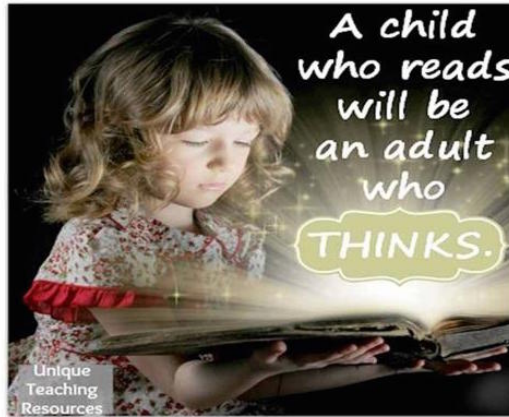
Milly's beautiful brown eyes eagerly take in the pages with large illustrations—and her small but attentive kindergarten ears listen intently to the words. She is immersed—and she is thinking.

While Apps allow your child to engage, a book allows her to think. It allows a child to experience things on many levels—the meaning of the words, the kinship between the words and the pictures, the emotion she hears in her Grampa's voice and the comfort of hearing a story which will not only allow her to think, but to feel.

Are kids reading more? Unfortunately, not. Research shows that children are often being left alone with their parent's iPads or smart phones to be 'entertained' instead of being engaged. A recent British study showed that at least 76 percent of adults either allowed or encouraged their kids to use the Apps on their phones or other devices.

But the Apps can't do what parents can. The Reading Foundation says reading 20 minutes to your child each day from birth to third grade "develops critical brain connections that determine how a child thinks, learns and grows."

According to a recent *New York Times* article, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), for the first time, is asking it's 62,000 members to tell their patients (new mothers, in particu-



lar) to begin reading to their infants at birth.

The AAP has also recommended that doctors tell their patients to keep their children away from "screens" until they are two years old—which it undoubtedly important although not entirely practical in today's society.

"Reading, as well as singing, is viewed as important in increasing the number of words that children hear in the earliest years of their lives," according to the *Times* article.

As my granddaughter and I are reading, my mind races back to the authors I read to her Mom and her two aunts when they were her age (Maurice Sendak, Dr. Seuss, Richard Scary and others—books that I still have and can share now with their children).

I remember how our daughters loved to be read to—and how it gave them not only comfort but provided that precious and rare closeness with their parents that comes by being bonded with the spoken word.

Sharing a book with a child is sharing an experience. As a parent or grandparent, your own enjoyment of the story allows a child to see the joy that you feel in reading to them. It is an extraordinary connection you share; the telling of a story, the

sound of words, some of them not yet understood, creating a security blanket of calm between parent and child that is at once unique and unforgettable.

This is not to say there is not a place for the Barbie apps or SpeedTrains (our three year old grandson's favorite), but if you aren't reading as much as they are watching, you are losing the battle.

Reading often provides the only opportunity to share a worldly connection with your child—a connection that will not only provide them comfort, but the foundation to learn new things, accept new people and, when they are older, to understand that reading creates an everlasting bond that connects generations.

"We read to know we are not alone," wrote William Nicholson in *Shadowlands*.

That is important not only for our children—but for the parents who love them.

[Part time Jasper resident David R. Altman is the author of "Death in the Foyer" a collection of poems published by Finishing Line Press last year. He can be reached at altman-davidr@gmail.com or through his website at www.davidraltman.com.]



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