

Author is firm believer in reading aloud to children

by Michael Testa

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Children's book author Rita Antoinette Borg maintains that the more parents and educators speak to children the brighter the children will be.

And read-aloud sessions are perfect time for engaging in such conversations because the reader and the listener can chat endlessly about the story, she argues.

A strong believer in storytelling as a means of communication with children, Ms Borg believes that reading aloud to children would change their lives forever. The secret is in what happens between the storyteller and the child.

"Even when the storyteller asks questions, the child is allowed to be noisy; the storyteller allows the child to have pure unadulterated fun.

"Engaging in this kind of conspiracy with children is perhaps the greatest advantage of reading aloud to them," she continues. "We can share the words and pictures, the ideas and viewpoints, hopes and fears and the big issues of life that we encounter together in the pages of a children's book.

"In this way, we bond through minds and hearts with our children. That bonding keeps children reading and loving it. Every time a child picks up a book that 'loving feeling' stimulates him or her to read more," she explained.

Ms Borg, an author of two bilingual picture books in Maltese and English for early readers, said the best time to start reading aloud to a baby is very early in life. Reading aloud to children early in life also rapidly develops their speaking skills.

"They cannot learn to talk unless they are spoken to, which is why psychologists and speech pathologists tell us we need to have deep and meaningful conversations with our kids long before they turn three," she said.

The author of the children's book *The Frogs' Great Escape/Il-Harba taz-Zringijiet*, which was given the Children's Book of the Year Award by the Malta Book Council last year, Ms Borg insists storytellers have a responsibility to choose good books.

Storytellers, parents, grandparents and anyone else who obtains a book to be read to a child should first read the book to himself to find out if it is interesting in a way that it would entertain and stimulate discussion. Colourful pictures are also important to arouse interest in young ones.

Ms Borg said that also important was whether the story brought out the difference between good and evil and what values it instilled in children. Children storytellers needed to be selective. "Just because a book is inexpensive and packed full of pages does not mean it is good for your child," she said.

Ms Borg also believes it is important to read both national languages to our children in order to make them feel comfortable with both.

"Maltese language books are packed with our country's culture and heritage and the books in English encompass loads of fiction and non-fiction alike. This is even more important nowadays when it is known that the standard of English is not as good as it used to be, even among university graduates."

Ms Borg said bilingual books were common in overseas populations, such as among Spanish-Americans, who spoke more than one indigenous language.

Reading a story in the language the child is most comfortable with will make it easier for the boy or the girl to understand the same story in the alternate language.

She believes that a children's book author has a wonderful opportunity to build on a child's imaginative powers, stretching them as much as possible. A good author may even determine if the child will be a lifetime reader.

Ms Borg reads stories during sessions for children aged between five and eight organised regularly at the Mosta public library on alternate Wednesdays, an initiative of local councillor Josephine Camilleri.