Paula Bourque

Literacy Coach

Why We Need Picture Books

Parents and students are in a hurry to get into chapter books at younger ages and "move beyond" picture books. Here's why we might want to rethink this push.

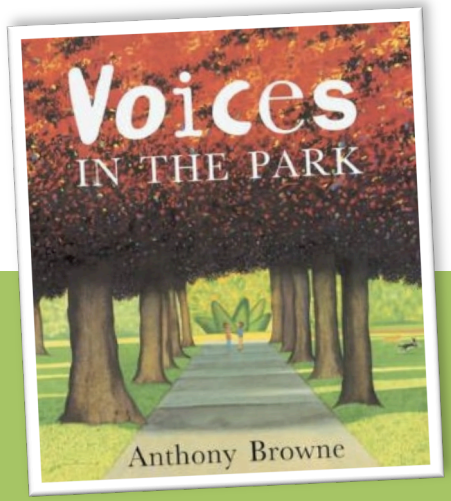
Top 5 Reasons

1. Picture Books Teach Visual Literacy

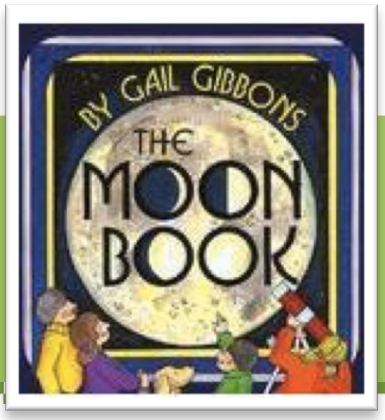
We live and work in a visual world. Children need to learn how to navigate the images as well as the words in their environment. Picture books allow them to 'read' visual images and infer meaning that cannot be done with words alone. Often the words and images in picture books have contrasting meanings/messages. Children can learn to interpret information through multiple lenses and synthesize their thinking in much more complex ways than with only one mode of information.

2. Picture books expand vocabulary

Picture books are shorter than chapter books. The author must tell the story with "an economy of words" and so the word choice is often much more precise and exact in order to create a rich story with fewer words. Picture book authors choose words to encourage visualization – those words in conjunction with the illustrations build vocabulary more deeply than pulling meaning from words alone. With chapter books new vocabulary must be gleaned from context clues from surrounding sentences. This is often difficult and not always a reliable way to build an accurate understanding of unfamiliar words. The visual images from picture books add another layer of support for comprehending what is read and building understandings for new words and concepts.



One of the best reasons to keep picture books in our children's lives is because they are FUN to read -and building a lifelong love of reading should be our ultimate goal!



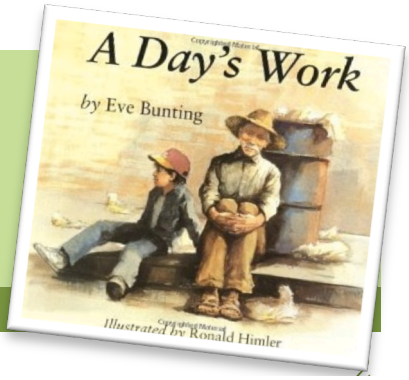
3. Picture books teach us about the world

Picture books often deal with topics that are relevant and age appropriate. They deal with children's fears, they make sense of our complex world in developmentally appropriate ways, and they teach a wide variety of topics with focus and clarity. Reading chapter books requires a much longer time commitment than reading picture books. In the time a student reads one chapter book, they could have read multiple picture books, exposing them to a greater variety of ideas, concepts, perspectives, genres and information. Children have a greater wealth of knowledge and understanding about their world when they have broader exposure to information about it.

4. Picture books are great 'mentor texts'

Picture books more closely resemble the type of writing that younger authors (K-3) produce. Children can look to picture books for ideas, frameworks, layouts, and word choices that authors use and imitate the author's craft much more readily. They can construct stories with solid beginnings, middles and ends because they can immerse themselves in many examples from their favorite authors, often in a single sitting. Children can relate to the topics because picture book authors target their ideas for this age group's interests, experiences and understanding.

5. Picture books encourage complex thinking

Picture books actually require a great deal of higher order thinking skills from young readers. Because they are often shorter, they require a great deal of: inferring (reading between the lines), synthesizing prior knowledge (making connections to their own lives), and predicting (using what they know to predict what will happen). They often have unexpected endings which challenge the reader's thinking. They require a synthesis of visual and written information to comprehend the story completely. Because students can read more picture books in the same time frame as a chapter books, students are exposed to many more opportunities to use a variety of strategies.

So before we consider the push to chapter books for our children, let's consider what they will be missing out on if we abandon picture books for the "prestige" of being a chapter book reader! Balancing our kids' "literacy diets" will give them a healthy head start!