

## Literacy

My daughter gives me Joy's school reading book and tidies us away onto the sofa. The story is called 'The Bad Lad'.

'What's a lad, Granny?'

'Just another word for a boy.'

This triggers Joy into telling me that a new boy has just come in her class called Franic. I like the sound of his name even though she has probably misheard it. I don't ask about him, I try to stick to the job in hand.

'C'mon let's spell,' I say, pointing to the letters.

'B a b bab,' Joy is trying too.

'That's a "d" not a "b". It spells bad. "b" and "d" often get themselves round the wrong way,' I said, remembering my teacher telling my mother that I was a 'back to front girl.' This was in front of a lot of people in the playground.

'L a d lad , t huh e.' Joy tries to blend the letters to make "the".

'That's "the", I say, pointing to the word. 'I think you just have to remember the shape of that word. We'll ask Mrs Weatherseed how to learn it best. Let's do some more, you're good at blending.'

I am under strict instructions to use the correct Key Stage 1 terminology. Joy carries on, but I sense that our reading time won't last much longer and feel a smidge of anxiety about her ability to concentrate.

'F i n Fin.'

'P i c pick . L o c lock.'

'Wow Joy,' I say. 'This is a story about a very bad thing, picking a lock to do a robbery is really bad, in the olden days you could go to prison for that.'

*I'm not bad*, she says defensively.

'You're not.' I say, giving the reading struggle a break and initiating a chat about what's good and what's bad. 'But actually you were quite bad and naughty the other day when I had to chase you round the garden, what was that about?'

'I wasn't being bad.' Annoyingly, Joy begins to cry.

The conversation is now going into reverse, with me on the defensive and being required to give comfort.

Our reading task is set aside. Joy climbs over the sofa seeking a space where I can't reach her.

I remember a half listened to interview with Jenni Murray about a special helpline which had been set up for the children of alcoholic parents. A six year old girl had rung on Christmas day saying that she hadn't had a present which must mean that she was bad and naughty, because she knew that Father Christmas doesn't bring presents to bad children. The helpline counsellor had asked her whether she had some paper and a pencil. She had, so they wrote words and drew a Christmas present story together. The girl did her drawing under her bed. They pretended it was become Alladin's cave, she was trying to escape, it was exciting. She stopped crying and they played together over the phone. They were happy and safe in the moment, telling stories. Jenni's interviewee reminded us that small children's moods change fast.

I had been really annoyed with Joy's behaviour the other day, and I decided not to give up on the opportunity to make a point of it. Joy had now contained herself in a small space behind the sofa. I looked over and addressed the huddled shape.

'Do you remember in the garden? Me chasing you round and round? You can run so fast now I couldn't catch you, but I can't remember why I was chasing you.'

'Two times chase me,' Joy boasts.

'What had you done?'

'Can't remember,' she says evasively, then after a pause, 'It was a key.'

'Oh yes, that's it,' I said, 'I was cross because you took it and if you'd dropped it and lost it, we'd have been locked out, we'd have had to sleep in the garden.'

A happy thought strikes her and she changes the subject yet again. 'Can we go camping?'

'Shall we?' I say, 'In the Easter holidays?'

'Last time we had shivery bites when we were cold.' She has absorbed the family tradition of calling after-swim biscuits "shivery bites". 'Can it be just you and me?'

Joy doesn't like saying goodbye. My daughter, her mum, hated that too. The nursery teacher used to tell me to look back through the window after I had dropped her off, promising that two minutes later I would see her playing happily. Joy's small sister operating at knee level, is more pragmatic.

'Ganny allays comes back,' she shouts, comforting her sister when teary goodbyes are made.

Of course, this makes me think about a day when I won't come back. Maybe, hopefully "I will just fade and wither on the bough" \* These lines from a poem float into my mind and I offer up a wordless prayer to something, someone, somewhere. I remember the unspeakable day when I had had to tell Joy's mum, aged seven that my parents, her granny and grandpa, had been killed in a car crash.

Four different generations of my family weave themselves into my thoughts, dense material for a family saga waiting to be written.

I give myself a shake and get back to the task in hand. Joy emerges from behind the sofa.

‘C’mon, get on with it,’ I say, ‘let’s read, Joy, can you read that word?’

‘S o b sob.’ ‘Sob’ is then repeated in the text, but she struggles to spell it out for a second time.

Watchful and curious, I wonder why she can’t recognise the shape of a word that has just been repeated, even after she has just spelled it out. ‘Is she going to have difficulty with some types of learning?’ I ask myself, ‘Is this what we’ve been advised to look out for?’

‘What has happened to poor Fin?’ I ask, drawing her attention to the picture in the book. It’s a cartoony boy with big eyes, he is behind bars, sobbing.

‘Locked in a cage, he needs a key to get out,’ she says. ‘Can I have your key Granny?’

‘Yes, I think he’s in prison for picking the lock and being a robber, but it’s just a story.’

‘Children don’t go to prison,’ Joy says confidently, getting up off the sofa. Bored with reading she distracts herself by making a mess of some scrap paper on the floor, tearing through sheets of words.

‘So, do you think Grannies ever go to prison?’ I ask her, voicing a worst fear.

‘Grannies NEVER EVER go to prison, they’re too nice,’ she asserts, taking some of the ripped paper behind the sofa again, so that I won’t see what she’s up to, and leaving the rest strewn all over the floor.

I remember a recent conversation with a work friend. We had met to discuss some ideas. Over our coffee, she had told me that a friend of a friend, a woman our age, had had a car accident and was now serving a prison sentence. It was relevant to the project we were discussing. Whilst inside, the woman had been dismayed by the low levels of literacy of the other inmates, they were mostly barely at Key Stage 1. She had pledged to do something to help: to fundraise, to write letters to influential people, to draw attention or whatever she could, as soon as she was released. I was shocked. I am well aware of the literacy issue in prisons, but what I really wanted to know was what had happened to the woman. Had she been the cause of death or injury to someone? ‘How could you ever recover from something like that?’ I wondered.

‘Joy is getting good at spelling out,’ I say later to my daughter, ‘but can’t seem to recognise the shapes of words yet.’

'Thanks Mum.' she says efficiently, sending a text message at the same time. 'I am finding this reading stage a bit of a drag, can't wait for when she can read real stories.'

We were interrupted by a fight breaking out between Joy and her sister. We both needed to move on with busy evenings: bath time, tidying the day's mess, endless admin and a train to catch. We both knew we could find another time to share memories and feelings. We both knew that literacy has many aspects.

I remembered being there when Joy was born, at least until the moment when I was not allowed to go into the operating theatre because an emergency procedure was needed to extract her. The baby was severely impacted in utero and three attempts were made to bring her to life. She had had many minutes without oxygen and needed to be kept chilled for several days in a special baby intensive care unit. We weren't allowed to touch her, imprisoned safely in her cot. It was vital for her to have no sensory stimulation whilst she was being sedated and kept at low temperature. The very thought that she would ever be able to see letters, 'blend' sounds, hear my voice, let alone be annoying, was unimaginable.

I feel a knot inside loosen and recover a little bit more.

The poem is Swineheard by Eileen Ni Chuilleanain

"I want to see an orchard where the trees grow in straight lines  
And the yellow fox finds shelter between the navy blue trunks  
Where it gets dark early in Summer  
And the apple blossom is allowed to wither on the bough"