

# Book selection for shared reading: Parents' considerations and researchers' views

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explores parents' considerations in selecting narrative picturebooks to read with their children. Participants included 104 middle-socioeconomic status parents (84 mothers, 20 fathers) of young children (51 boys, 53 girls;  $M_{\text{age}} = 61.26$ ,  $SD = 9.52$ ). We presented parents with two translated children's books whose content was previously unfamiliar to them: Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1991) and Julia Donaldson's *Where's My Mom?* (2008). A semi-structured interview stimulated the conversation surrounding what parents consider is a good book to read to their children, what they like in a good children's book, and why. Parents' responses highlighted some main considerations: purpose behind their reading, illustrations, centrality of the written text and structure. We highlight how these elements are similar to and different from those that have emerged from research in children's development, literacy and literature, and recommend how parents, practitioners and the research community can dialogue in ways that may enhance adult–child book interactions.

## Keywords

Book choice, children's literature, quality literature, reading purpose, illustrations

## Introduction

Extensive research in the area of joint book reading has shown a myriad of benefits to this shared interaction between parents and their children in the

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preschool and early school years. This body of literature provides clear evidence supporting the relationship between frequency of book reading and children's language development (Cunningham, 2010; Dickinson and Porche, 2011; van Kleeck and Stahl, 2003), early literacy skills (Cunningham, 2010; Korat et al., 2007; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002) and later reading ability in school (Baker et al., 2001; Mol and Bus, 2011). Studies have also shown a relationship between shared reading and children's social-emotional adjustment (Aram et al., 2013; Reese et al., 2003). More recent research has focused on aspects, such as the book itself, that can impact on the quality of these shared reading interactions and their outcomes (e.g. Bojczyk et al., 2016). As Lennox (2013) notes, 'selecting the right book contributes towards successful read-alouds' (p. 383). But how can we determine what is the "right book"?

Researchers in child development and children's literature have found that among other elements, a book's illustrations, language, socio-emotional content and structure can potentially impact on the shared reading interaction (e.g. Garner et al., 2008; Hamilton, 2009; Hoffman et al., 2015). At the same time, only a few studies have explored the elements that parents take into account when selecting a book for shared reading (but, see Anderson et al., 2001; Saracho and Spodek, 2010). The current study thus had two aims: first, to gain an in-depth understanding of elements that parents take into consideration regarding children's picture books,<sup>1</sup> and second, to explore how these elements compare to some of those emerging from research in child development and literature.

### **Book selection**

A small number of studies have explored the elements that parents take into account when selecting books for joint reading. Anderson et al. (2001) presented 24 parents with 14 famous children's books and asked the parents to select books they would or would not read and explain their choices. The results showed that the topic of the book was the most frequent criterion in parents' selection or rejection of a book. Building on Anderson et al.'s study, Aram and Aviram (2009) found that when selecting books to read to their children, parents focused on whether a book contains rich language and good language flow, whether the characters and relationships are convincing and if events are interesting and logically connected. Other studies report that parents prefer storybooks (Robertson and Reese, 2017; Saracho and Spodek, 2010) to other genres and select books that interested them in their own childhoods (Švab and Žumer, 2015) and those that they think will interest their children

(Tekin and Tekin, 2006; Wilkinson, 2003). The current study expands upon the aforementioned studies with an in-depth exploration of what elements parents consider important when thinking about narrative picture books to read to their children. We examined the elements that parents reflect on when discussing their book selections and how these compare to researchers' views.

### *Elements emerging from research*

Researchers in child development and early literacy development, along with those in children's literature, have particular views regarding what constitutes the 'right' books to share with young children to optimize the beneficial outcomes of shared reading interactions. These views revolve around desirable elements in a number of areas of a book, including: illustrations, language, social-emotional aspects and genre.

*Illustrations.* Research has shown that the illustrations in books are effective in creating a meaning-making environment for children, helping them to develop greater comprehension and enabling them to form more text-to-reader connections (e.g. Mantei and Kervin, 2014; O'Neil, 2011; Sipe, 2015, but see Schickedanz and Collins, 2012 for a discussion of children's misunderstandings of illustrations). Illustrations can help to establish the setting, develop the characters, advance the plot and provide different viewpoints (Sipe, 2015). Greenhoot et al. (2014) found that illustrations stimulated greater parent-child interaction during shared book reading, and contributed to greater recall of the story by children. Other research has revealed that children are able to create meaning from the illustrations in picture books, particularly when the text and words are mutually supportive (Arizpe and Styles, 2015). Taking the illustrations into account when selecting books to share with children can help to promote their visual literacy, as well as their ability to learn from and understand books.

*Written language.* Studies emphasize the importance of varied language elements – e.g. new vocabulary, rhyme and metaphors – in the development of children's language and literacy skills (Dickinson and Porche, 2011; Dwyer and Neuman, 2008; Hoffman et al., 2015; Read, 2014; Whorrall and Cabell, 2015). Montag et al. (2015) compared the vocabulary in 100 children's picture books to that in children's conversations. They found that the books contained more unique words than children's conversations, and consequently

provide a good opportunity to expand children's vocabulary. Zauche et al. (2016) note that language-rich interactions such as shared reading positively influence children's language and literacy skills. Selecting books with diverse language elements and vocabulary can facilitate children's language and literacy development.

*Social-emotional content.* Studies have shown that books that relate to more mental aspects (e.g. false beliefs) and contain more mental terms (e.g. frustrated, jealous) can help to stimulate parent-child conversations surrounding emotions and relationships (Ziv et al., 2014). These, in turn, have been shown to contribute to children's social-emotional development (e.g. Brownell et al., 2013; Drummond et al., 2014; Garner et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2003). Interpersonal relationships and references to the motives underlying characters' behaviours are an integral part of children's literature (Dyer et al., 2000). Storybooks frequently offer opportunities to expose children to social situations and often refer to the characters' emotions, thoughts, intentions, beliefs and desires. Indeed, Dyer et al. (2000) found that mental terms occur quite frequently in children's books, more so than in everyday language. Sharing books with young children that focus on relationships and have mental-state content can raise children's awareness of social-emotional issues and promote their understanding of mental and emotional states.

*Genre.* Research has shown that both parents and children respond differently in shared reading situations based on the book's genre or subgenre (for an in-depth discussion of genres in children's literature, see e.g. Barone, 2010; Larson, 2015) (e.g. Bergman Deitcher and Johnson, 2015; Lennox, 2013; Yopp and Yopp, 2006). For example, shared reading of informational texts results in more cognitively challenging talk between adults and children (e.g. Price et al., 2012), and reading alphabet books can elicit a higher rate of phonological awareness and print concept behaviour by parents (Davis et al., 2010; Stadler and McEvoy, 2004). Moschovaki and Meadows (2005) found that the use of the more familiar narrative text type in an information book resulted in more predictive and analytic comments by children. Exposure to a variety of book genres and subgenres can positively impact on shared reading interactions and help children learn about the organization and purpose of different types of books (Lennox, 2013).

Based on the above research, it appears that selecting books with particular elements can provide children with different learning opportunities, as well as

opportunities for varied parent–child interactions. Specifically, books should include illustrations that help to contribute to and enrich children’s understanding of books and ability to create meaning from them; rich and varied language that is not too simplistic; authentic social interactions and relationships as well as expanded mental and emotional terms; and a variety of genres and subgenres should be shared. All this emerges from researchers’ views; yet, we have little information regarding how parents relate to these elements. What do parents take into account when selecting books to read with their children? What do they like about children’s books? What do they consider a good children’s book to read to their young children?

### *Current study*

The current study qualitatively explored the elements that parents consider important when thinking about books to read to their children. Parents were provided with two children’s books to examine and asked to select the one they would prefer for shared reading. The parents were then interviewed and asked to explain the reasons for their selections and detail the characteristics that they feel are important in good books for young children. The following research questions thus guided the study:

1. What elements do parents consider important in good children’s books?
2. How do parents’ views on book elements resemble those that have emerged from the research discussed above?

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

Participants were 104 Israeli parents of young children (51 boys and 53 girls) who ranged in age between 44 and 82 months ( $M = 61.26$ ,  $SD = 9.52$ ). Of these parents, 84 were mothers (80.8%) and 20 were fathers (19.2%). Mothers’ ages ranged from 25 to 46 years ( $M = 36.57$ ,  $SD = 4.13$ ) and fathers’ age ranged from 33 to 49 years ( $M = 36.67$ ,  $SD = 3.78$ ). The majority of participating families were middle-upper socioeconomic status (SES) and a majority of the parents (81.77%) held at least a bachelor’s degree.

### **Selected books**

Whereas other studies have included a variety of genres (e.g. Anderson et al., 2001), we focused solely on narrative picture books, as previous research has shown that adults and preschoolers gravitate towards this genre (Pentimonti et al., 2011; Saracho and Spodek, 2010; Yopp and Yopp, 2012). In Israel, books for young children mainly comprise those written by Israeli authors, as well as translated books from around the world. Picture books are ubiquitous for this age range, to the near-exclusion of other genres. Two books were selected for the current study: *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak (1991) and *Where's My Mom* by Julia Donaldson (2008). Both books are written by well-known authors, target young children, are narratives and are similar in length. In both books the main characters are distant from their mothers and eventually are reunited. In *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max, the main character, misbehaves and is sent to his room. There he imagines a whole different land filled with wild things, where he can be king. Yet, he comes to realize that he wants to be where he is loved, and so he returns home. In *Where's My Mom*, a young monkey has lost his mother and tries to find her. Other animals try to help and the monkey's descriptions lead him to other animals, eventually reuniting him with his mother. Both books contain social-emotional content and raise varying emotions in the reader.

The two selected books also differ in a number of ways. The illustrations in *Where's My Mom* are vibrant jungle colours, and follow along with the story line. In *Where the Wild Things Are*, the illustrations are more monochromatic and help to tell the story. *Where's My Mom* is characterized by a closed structure with a clear problem and solution. *Where The Wild Things Are* is a more open structure, where the character finds the solution within himself, and learns about actions and consequences. Regarding language, the two books also differ somewhat. *Where's My Mom* is written in rhyme. The words primarily focus on describing different animals, and include words such as *hunk*, *baggy*, *slither* and *squawk*. *Where the Wild Things Are* is not written in rhyme. It includes metaphorical phrases, such as 'sailed in and out of weeks, and almost over a year' and words such as *mischief*, *gnashed*, *tamed* and *rumpus*.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

Parents were presented with and asked to read both books to themselves. We asked the following questions to initiate semi-structured interviews: 'Which book is a better book in your opinion? Why?' This was followed by other questions that aimed to further probe parents' views on children's books

in general and encourage greater elaboration: 'Discuss what you consider to be good children's books and why'; 'What characterizes a good children's book?'; and 'Describe a children's book that you feel is not good, and why.'

### **Procedure**

The researcher made initial contact with parents via flyers distributed by eight teachers from different preschools that explained the purpose of the study. After parents consented to participate, a meeting was scheduled at home. Each meeting lasted approximately 40 minutes. At the beginning of the meeting, parents were presented with *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Where's My Mom* in counterbalanced order, and it was verified that parents were unfamiliar with the content of both books. Parents were asked to read the two books. A semi-structured interview was then conducted, asking parents to explain their book choice and detail their thoughts on children's books in general.

## **Results**

### ***Personal semi-structured interviews***

Following transcription of the interviews, data were analysed using a thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The process of thematization was carried out by two researchers (MA graduate students in school counselling). Each researcher independently conducted iterative reviews of the transcripts, taking preliminary notes regarding ideas raised by the parents. Next, guided by the research questions, the two researchers jointly grouped the ideas repeatedly mentioned by different interviewees into themes and subthemes. Any disagreements between the researchers were resolved by discussion until agreement was reached. The four key themes (italicized) and their subthemes are: (1) *Purpose of book reading*: (a) the books' messages (b) emotional support, (c) knowledge enrichment and (d) pleasure; (2) *Centrality of the text in children's book selections*: (a) language level, (b) rhythm and flow and (c) text length; (3) *Importance of the book's appearance*: (a) aesthetics of the illustrations and (b) emotions raised by illustrations; (4) *Importance of books' structure*: (a) explicit vs implicit messages and (b) realistic vs imaginary content. Table 1 shows the overall results of the numbers of parents who discussed each particular subtheme.

Below, we present an overview of the themes, the numbers of parents (X/104) who addressed each theme, and a number of quotations from different parents to illustrate their views.

**Table 1.** Numbers of parents who discussed the subcategories of each theme (N = 104).

Theme/Subthemes	Number of parents (out of 104)
<b>Theme 1: Purpose of bookreading</b>	
Books' morals/messages	101
Emotional support	36
Knowledge enrichment	35
Pleasure	6
<b>Theme 2: Centrality of the text</b>	
Language level	50
Rhythm, rhyme, flow	34
Text length	26
<b>Theme 3: Importance of books' appearance</b>	
Aesthetics of the illustrations	54
Emotions raised by the illustrations	36
<b>Theme 4: Importance of book's structure</b>	
Open vs closed structure	39
Content – reality vs imaginary	25

*Theme 1: Purpose of shared reading.* Parents reported that their book selections are influenced by the reason that they read with their child. Reasons for reading include passing on morals/messages, helping children deal with social-emotional issues, imparting knowledge and pleasure.

- (a) *Morals/Messages.* Nearly all the parents (101/104) mentioned joint book reading as an opportunity to impart morals to their child and that they want a book to contain content that lends itself to discussing messages and morals. Many parents specifically used the term 'message' and/or 'moral' as one of the considerations in selecting a book (69/104).
- 'It's important to me that the book should have a moral, that he [the child] should take things from the book himself, that he should understand.'
  - 'I liked the moral in *Where the Wild Things Are*. Everything that he went through, the moral at the end, all the events that he goes through and that he comes home at the end.'
  - 'In *Where the Wild Things Are*, he doesn't want to be with his mother, he decides to follow his dream and go to another place, and that's negative in my eyes.'
- (b) *Social-emotional support.* Approximately one-third of the parents (36/104) referred to books as a tool to stimulate discussions surrounding social-emotional issues.

As such, they reported selecting books where the topic is appropriate for their children's social-emotional needs.

- 'A good book can be applied to daily life. For example, because of my recent divorce, I bought a book about varying family types. One of my children was worried a lot of the time, so I bought her a book about worry dolls. You can use books for daily life, solutions to specific problems.'
  - 'When my child was starting to be afraid, I bought a book about fear, there is an important message... it helped him. It helped him cope with the fear.'
- (c) *Enriching knowledge.* Approximately one-third of the parents (35/104) mentioned learning as part of their purpose in reading to their child. Parents see shared book reading as an opportunity to impart knowledge. They state that a good book includes general information that can expand and enrich their child's knowledge base.
- 'You should be able to learn something from a book besides the moral. For instance, in *Where's My Mom*, you can learn about differences between animals.'
  - 'In *Where the Wild Things Are*, there's just a moral about one boy. In contrast, in *Where's My Mom* you learn about animals – what they look like, varying adjectives that describe them, like tall, short, striped.'
- (d) *Reading for pleasure.* Only six parents (6/104) commented that a good book is one that is pleasurable to read. These parents say they prefer books with an interesting text, books that are amusing and 'fun.' For example, one parent stated, 'I'm happy if there is a moral, but not every book has to have one. It can also just be for pleasure.'

*Theme 2: Centrality of the text.* The text of a book and the kind of language in which it is written are significant considerations in most parents' selections for shared reading (88/104). Parents noted that elements such as the language level of the book, the rhythm and flow of the book and the length of the book are important. Though they have varying preferences about these elements, parents did report taking them into consideration when selecting books to read to their children.

- (a) *Language level.* Nearly half of the participating parents (50/104) related to a book's linguistic level in making their selection. These parents spanned the gamut in terms of their desired level of language in a book. At one end of the spectrum, parents (20/104) prefer that books be written in higher-level language through which children will be exposed to a variety of unfamiliar words. These parents see books as a tool and an opportunity to teach new words to their children and improve their vocabulary.
- 'Developing their vocabulary – opposites, synonyms. I like it when there are higher level vocabulary words in a book.'

- 'Higher-level language . . . I ask what a word is and I can explain it.'

At the other end of the spectrum, parents (10/104) prefer books to be written in simple language that children know well.

- 'It's simple language and easy to read it, you don't have to change anything . . . I prefer simple.'
- 'To me, a good book is clear . . . without words that the child doesn't understand, not complicated, and not using language that's too hard for the child.'

The other parents (20/104) prefer that the text rely primarily on known words, but also includes some unfamiliar words.

- 'I prefer language that's appropriate for my child . . . should be in her language, not too difficult. The book should integrate her language with language that's somewhat higher so that she can learn and develop.'
- 'The language should be on his level and just a little bit higher, but he should be able to understand it.'

(b) *Rhythm, rhyme, and flow.* About one-third of interviewed parents (34/104) referred to rhyme as an element that contributes to their selection of a book. To them, rhyming is pleasant to the ear and flows.

- 'The rhyme, when I read it, it should be melodious, the way it's written should be intuitive.'
- 'The reading should flow, should sound good to the ear.'

Some parents noted that rhyming serves as a way for their child to participate in the reading. For these parents, rhyming serves to 'pull' both them and their child into the book and gives them pleasure.

- 'Books that rhyme flow when you read them. When I read it again the child says it with me and can recite it himself.'
- '*Where's My Mom* is metred, it rhymes, children can participate. They can complete the sentences during reading. It's a book that is fun to read and it's fun for me to read it to him.'

(c) *Text length.* Approximately one-quarter of the parents (26/104) mentioned the length of the text, with most of those parents (22/26) expressing a preference for shorter texts.

- 'The amount of text should be short, she shouldn't lose her patience . . . I'm looking for something that won't be too long because I have to read it to her.'

- 'I prefer more books, but they need to be short.'

*Theme 3: Importance of a book's appearance.* For many parents, a book's appearance is an important criterion in its selection. Most of the parents (89/104) discussed aspects of the book's visual appearance as well as the illustrations. Approximately half of these parents (44/89) specifically expressed a preference for illustrations that are 'pleasant to the eye', 'beautiful', 'clear', 'not abstract', 'cheerful' and 'optimistic'. Further, parents prefer illustrations with details that can pique the child's curiosity and stimulate their imagination. They also like it when the illustrations and text are complementary (Liang and Galda, 2015), where the pictures match the words.

- 'The illustrations are important because the child isn't reading yet, so he enjoys the illustrations. The experience is based upon the appearance.'

*Where the Wild Things Are* has a number of pages that contain only illustrations and no text. Parents had mixed reactions to this. Seven parents considered this element to be positive and preferred it.

- 'I liked that there were some pages without text. It leaves more room to talk about certain topics more freely.'

In contrast, five parents expressed a preference for more text relative to illustrations.

- 'I didn't like that in *Where the Wild Things Are* there are pages without any text at all.'

Only 14 parents mentioned that they seek uniqueness in the book's appearance. These parents rejected 'simple' illustrations and expressed a preference for 'interesting' illustrations, and even an expectation of a unique visual appearance.

- 'In *Where the Wild Things Are* the illustrations are very unique, they engage the curiosity and stimulate the imagination. In *Where's My Mom*, the illustrations are nice and colourful and children are curious, but they are flat.'
- 'I like the illustrations in *Where the Wild Things Are*, the development of the story, which is expressed in the illustrations . . . There has to be something good, not

simplistic. The illustration can be one-to-one with the text but it should add some sort of accompaniment.’

The elements that parents mentioned regarding a book’s aesthetics related primarily to the aesthetics of the illustrations and the emotions raised by them.

- (a) *Aesthetics of illustrations.* More than half of the parents (54/104) related specifically to the colourfulness of illustrations. Apart from three parents who disapproved of too much colour, the parents expressed a preference for colourful books. In their minds, a colourful book ‘invites’ the child to read. Parents prefer the use of warm colours that are ‘alive’.
- ‘The book is very colourful . . . the second book is much more grey. I like books like encyclopedias, we buy books like that; they should be colourful.’
  - ‘The illustrations, the colourfulness, are amazing, they are very inviting. *Where the Wild Things Are* is not colourful enough and not inviting.’
- (b) *Emotions raised by illustrations.* Some parents (36/104) discussed how a book’s appearance raises their own emotions and those of their children. These parents note that the style of the illustrations and their colourfulness have an emotional effect; they can create a pleasant or an unpleasant feeling, raise a child’s interest, curiosity and a number of other emotions, such as happiness, love, depression and fear. Many parents expressed doubts about the illustrations accompanying *Where the Wild Things Are*, claiming that they might raise fear or other unpleasant emotions in their child.
- ‘The colours and illustrations make me less want to read it. It’s nicer to see animals smiling, laughing, more of an optimistic world.’
  - ‘*Where’s My Mom* has warmer illustrations and the cover is more inviting. The illustrations in *Where the Wild Things Are* are scarier. I wouldn’t pick it because of the cover and the content.’

**Theme 4: Importance of a book’s structure.** Parents expressed varying thoughts on the overall structure of a book.

- (a) *Open vs closed structure.* When selecting books, parents consider how much the book allows for the reader’s interpretation and independent thought by the child. Some parents (19/104) consider room for interpretation, such as in *Where the Wild Things Are*, a positive element of a book. They expressed a preference for ‘open’ books that stimulate questions and discussion, allow for independent thinking, and provide a place for the child to express their personal interpretation of a book.

- ‘Where the Wild Things Are is more of a picture book, it gives more freedom to the child’s chaos . . . it’s not a story for one time.’
- ‘The story shouldn’t be too banal, it should leave room for the child’s imagination, so that the child can finish the story.’
- ‘Where the Wild Things Are is a good book, you’re not spoon-fed the moral.’

In contrast, other parents (20/104) rejected the open format of the book. To them, this style seemed not as clear or organized, and they expressed a preference for books that have a clear structure and are both unambiguous and conclusive.

- ‘I didn’t connect to *Where the Wild Things Are*. I don’t understand the concept of this book, it’s less clear to me.’
- ‘A book should have a moral, so you can see what the author thinks. Not like in the second book (*Where the Wild Things Are*).’

(b) Content – reality vs imaginary. Approximately one-quarter of interviewed parents (25/104) stated that they like books to refer to the imaginary world.

- ‘Where the Wild Things Are occurs in the imaginary world, it happens more in the head . . . I like books that take place in the imagination, so that you can deduce from them, they don’t reveal too much.’
- ‘I like when it’s more imaginary. The book should develop the child’s imagination. Our lives are very analytical, so there’s a lack of this [imagination] with the child.’

Only a few parents (6/104) explicitly stated that they don’t like books dealing with imaginary worlds. Their preference for more realistic books stemmed from a concern that the child wouldn’t understand the book. For instance, one parent noted, ‘I connect less to books that deal with the imaginary, my daughter wouldn’t understand the book; it’s too complicated.’

Overall, parents discussed aspects that are important to them when selecting a book to share with their children. They consider the purpose for which they are reading and elements such as the book’s appearance, its structure and the complexity of language in which it is written. When focusing specifically on the two books in the book choice task, a majority of the parents (74/104) expressed a preference for *Where’s My Mom?* as a book they would want to read with their child.

## Discussion

This study set out to qualitatively explore how parents reflect on the elements that they take into consideration when selecting narrative picture books to

read with their children. We were also interested in how the elements that parents discuss compare to those that emerge from research studies. The interviews revealed that parents take a variety of aspects into consideration when selecting books, relating to their own preferences, aspects relating to their children, and elements of the books. Certain themes and subthemes emerged across the parents we interviewed, showing a variety of elements that parents reflect upon regarding children's books, including the book's illustrations, language and social-emotional content. Additionally, these parents consider other aspects that they consider important, such as the purpose behind shared reading.

### **Illustrations**

The parents in this study placed a great deal of emphasis on a book's appearance and illustrations. They expressed a strong preference for colourful and cheerful illustrations, which many parents saw as an appealing feature of *Where's My Mom?* compared to *Where the Wild Things Are*. Whereas the latter contains illustrations that are largely grey, brown and blue, the former contains bright, vivid illustrations composed of the full rainbow of colours. Studies show that children react to illustrations when selecting books to read (Heninger, 2014). Preschool children have been found to prefer colourful book covers with images that are familiar to them (Danko-McGhee and Slutsky, 2011), while first and third graders prefer pictures that are both realistic and bright (Brookshire et al., 2002).

Children also seem to show some developmental differences in their responses to pictures in books (Walsh, 2003). In a study by Walsh (2003) examining children's oral responses to the illustrations in two picture books, first graders had more detailed and varied responses to pictures than Kindergartners. As children learn more about books as they grow and mature, they may respond differently to different types of illustrations. Parents, in responding to their children's developmental level when reading books (e.g. Aram, 2007), may select books whose illustrations are appropriate for their perception of their child's developmental level. As one parent noted, 'The pictures are too frightening.' Future studies may be able to discern whether and how children's ages impact on parent's choices regarding the illustrations in books.

### **Language**

The parents we interviewed had varying views regarding the ideal language of books they share with their children. Many of the parents we interviewed had

a preference for rhyme in the books they share with their children, and they appreciated this element in *Where's My Mom*. Recent research seems to support the importance of rhyme for early language and literacy development (e.g. Király et al., 2017; Read, 2014). Dunst et al. (2011) note that knowledge of and experience with nursery rhymes is associated with phonological measures, as well as alphabet knowledge and letter-sound awareness, all of which are important early literacy skills. Additionally, rhymes seem to stimulate natural reading behaviours, such as dramatic pauses, which enhance children's word retention (Read et al., 2014).

Some of the parents discussed a desire for more complex language and higher-level words, seeing these as important in the books they select. A significant amount of research supports the use of shared book reading in advancing children's language and literacy skills and how varied language elements can promote children's language and literacy development (e.g. Dwyer and Neuman, 2008; Houston-Price et al. 2014; Horst and Houston-Price, 2015; Zauche et al., 2016). *Where the Wild Things Are* contains frequent metaphorical language and a number of higher-level vocabulary words for young children (Colston and Kuiper, 2002). Although they did not specifically note this when discussing their book choice, parents who preferred books to be written in higher-level language may have been attracted to Sendak's book.

Along from the discourse stimulated by the shared book reading interactions, both books presented to parents in the current study have the potential to enrich children's language, whether via higher-level figurative language or via rhyme. We would encourage parents to explore the language in books they select for shared reading and take it into consideration as an element that can help the development of young children's vocabulary and promote their ability to engage with and process complex texts (Hoffman et al., 2015; Mesmer, 2016).

### ***Social-emotional content***

Nearly a third of the parents in this study see narrative books as a tool that can be used to work on social-emotional issues with their child. Parents' related to the emotions that are raised by the plot and illustrations in a book and commented that their book selections are influenced by events that the child goes through, and that they select topics that are connected to their children's social-emotional states. These responses are in line with research showing that shared book reading provides an effective context in which parents discuss social-emotional issues, and that this kind of talk promotes

children's social cognition and empathy (e.g. Drummond et al., 2014; Grazzani and Ornaghi, 2011; Kucirkova and Tompkins, 2014; Shapira et al., 2015). Books that contain more social-emotional content are likely to promote increased social-emotional and mental-state discourse between parents and children (Adrian et al., 2005). While parents seem to select books that relate to their child's social and emotional needs, raising parents' awareness to the potential impact of mental-state content in books and its surrounding discourse can further promote children's prosocial awareness and behaviour.

### *Purpose of shared reading*

Nearly all the parents in this study take into account their purpose in reading when they select books to read to their children. The majority of parents consider imparting a moral or message as part of their purpose in shared reading, and consequently they select books that can be used for this function. Parents' preference for one book or the other from the two we presented may reflect some of these purposes (Owens, 1992). For instance, parents who feel strongly about using shared reading as a time to impart morals may be more drawn to *Where the Wild Things Are*, as it contains a stronger, more obvious moral message. Alternatively, parents whose focus is more on social-emotional support may prefer *Where's My Mom*, as it has a distinct emotional component – that of a child being lost. Acknowledging children's fear of being lost via a story may help to alleviate some of the fear. Additionally, parents whose purpose in reading is to enrich their children's knowledge may prefer *Where's My Mom*, through which children can learn elements of different animals.

Some studies have explored the relations between parents' literacy beliefs or goals and their literacy behaviours, such as shared reading, reading and writing activities, and the home literacy environment (e.g. Lynch et al., 2006; Nowak and Evans, 2013). For example, Weigel et al. (2006) found that mothers who believed more strongly in taking an active role in their children's literacy development had a more enriched home literacy environment and provided more literacy opportunities for their children. More specifically relating to shared book reading, Meagher et al. (2008) found that mothers adjusted their behaviours during reading in line with their literacy beliefs. Mothers who believed that shared reading should include more learning had higher levels of scaffolding during reading, asked more questions and provided more information, while those who believed the interaction should be more fun included more praise for the child. In the current study as well, the views parents hold regarding the purpose of

reading may relate to the types of books they have in the home, the books they select for their children, and how read to them. Studies that more carefully examine the association between parents' literacy beliefs and their book choices can shed greater light on how parents' purpose in reading influences their selections.

### *Research and practice*

As noted in the discussion above, there are many elements that parents take into account in their consideration of book selection that are in line with child development and literature research. At the same time, there are areas where research and parents' practice of book selection seem less aligned.

One area where differences between research and practice emerge relates to books' illustrations. Researchers have been paying increased attention to picture books, exploring the role that they play in young children's lives and how children react to them (e.g. Arizpe and Styles, 2015; Nikolajeva, 2002; Sipe, 2008, 2015; Walsh, 2003; Yu, 2012). In particular, researchers have noted the importance of the synergy between pictures and text in picture books – how pictures and text work together to support each other. Specifically regarding *Where the Wild Things Are*, Sipe (2015) notes that the story would 'simply not exist without its visual components' (p. 381). Yet many parents in this study seemed less attracted to the illustrations in *Where the Wild Things Are*, both from the aesthetic perspective as well as the emotional perspective. As one parent noted in discussing the illustrations, '*Where the Wild Things Are* doesn't make me smile, it's scary. The characters are not pleasant and the pictures are grey.'

A second area where differences emerge relates to books' language. Of all the participating parents, only about one-fifth preferred higher-level language in the books they read with their children. Research has consistently shown that shared book reading has the 'power to create interactional contexts that nourish language development' (Dickinson et al., 2012, abstract). Books that provide decontextualized language, higher-level vocabulary and different types of language (e.g. metaphors) can stimulate children's language and literacy development (e.g. Colston and Kuiper, 2002; Dwyer and Neuman, 2008).

Regarding the social-emotional content of books, some differences emerge between how parents and researchers view this element. Many parents were not interested in discussing more emotionally difficult aspects in books, such as the child being angry in *Where the Wild Things Are*. At the same time, research has revealed that picturebooks can provide an effective context from

which children can learn to understand others' points of view, emotions and thoughts (Aram et al., 2013; Dyer et al., 2000). Shared reading of these books can allow children to explore difficult emotional or social situations from a distance, while still being able to learn from them.

Last, this study focused on narrative picture books in the book choice task, and perhaps put parents in the mindset of thinking about picture books. Nonetheless, when discussing children's literature in general, parents did not discuss the issue of genre or different book types. Yet research has shown that different book genres and subgenres can help children to learn about the structure and purpose of different types of books (Lennox, 2013), and impact upon shared reading interaction (e.g. Price et al., 2012).

To help explain some of these differences between parents and researchers, one can look to the different goals motivating them. Parents are first and foremost focused on their own child. The parents in this study display an awareness of and sensitivity towards their child when making their selections of books to share. This was evident throughout the interviews with the parents. For example, one mother showed awareness of her child's cognitive abilities when explaining her preference for *Where's My Mom*, saying, 'My daughter wouldn't understand [*Where the Wild Things Are*], it's too complicated.' Regarding language, another parent noted, 'I look at the language in which the story is told – it should be accessible, not contain too many big words; it should expand his vocabulary but not overdo it.' This is in line with studies that have shown that mothers are sensitive to their child, and adjust their level of support in a variety of joint parent–child literacy interactions (e.g. Aram, 2008). Within the Vygotskian (1978) learning approach, parents who know their child's level can support them and provide them with an experience that challenges them to reach higher language levels, creating opportunities for the child to construct meaning within their Zone of Proximal Development.

Early childhood literacy researchers tend to focus on larger groups of children and are motivated to determine best practice for school and home settings. Dialogue between researchers, practitioners (e.g. teachers, librarians, specialists in child development) and parents can help all parties. Parents may benefit from an increased understanding of how elements of books can positively impact their children's development. Programmes such as Reach Out and Read ([reachoutandread.org](http://reachoutandread.org)) and PJ Library ([pjlibrary.org](http://pjlibrary.org)) that advocate early child literacy, and research-to-practice programmes such as one by the U.S. National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013) can help in this endeavour. Beyond this, there is

room to dialogue with parents about books and their characteristics, and the impact that these different elements can have on parent–child discourse and on children’s development. For example, many libraries have story time. Having experts in children’s literature or development present a variety of books and discuss the benefits of different aspects of books with parents prior to story time can expose parents to new types of books and help them better understand the meaning of specific elements in books. Similarly, professional development programmes for early childhood educators can encourage preschool teachers to dialogue with parents about their choices for shared reading and how a better understanding of books’ format and style can help children develop a deeper understanding of books (e.g. Liang and Galda, 2015). We recommend continued exploration into parents’ book selection practices so that research and practice can continue to inform one another and thus develop the most effective shared reading interactions.

### *Limitations*

A number of limitations exist regarding the findings of this study. The parents in this study were from middle-upper SES and had high levels of education. Studies have shown that differences exist between upper and lower SES parents in terms of their frequency of shared reading (Aikens and Barbarin, 2013) and their mediation during shared reading (Korat et al., 2007). This variable may thus have impacted upon parents’ considerations during book selection in the current study. We think that a more varied sample in terms of the level of SES and level of education is important when examining parents’ book selection practices. As well, increasing the number of participating fathers would enable greater generalization from the results of this study. Fathers are underrepresented in much of the research on shared book reading, though some studies indicate that fathers focus on different elements than mothers when reading (Korat et al., 2008; Swain et al., 2017; Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2011). As with other areas of shared reading, future research should examine whether differences exist between mothers and fathers in the elements they consider when selecting children’s books to read with their child. This can provide a fuller picture of the practices involved in book selection within a family. The questions used to guide parents during the interview were all directed towards parents’ views and thoughts, yet some parents also discussed how their children relate to aspects of books. Formulating questions that address both parents’ own ways of relating to books’ elements as well as how their children relate to those elements can

help untangle these perspectives. Lastly, presenting parents with a greater variety of books to choose from may shed further light on the elements that they take into account when making their selections.

## **Conclusion**

Shared book reading involves three aspects – the parent, the child and the book. This study focused on the latter and explored the elements that parents take into account when selecting books to read with their children. We found that parents take into consideration the reasons why they are reading and aspects of the book itself, such as content and appearance. Parents are also aware of, and take into account, their own child's level of development when selecting books. Some of the parents' considerations differed from the researchers' views, yet there was a significant amount of convergence between the elements that parents consider important and those that emerge from research as enhancing shared reading interactions. Dialogue between parents, practitioners and the research community can promote deeper understandings of the most effective elements to consider when selecting books for shared reading.

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## **Note**

1. For the purposes of this study, 'picture books' refers to illustrated, narrative children's books. For detailed explanations of the types of illustrated children's books, which is beyond the scope of this paper, see Nikolajeva and Scott's (2006) *How Picturebooks Work*.

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