

POETRY MEDIA SERVICE

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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words ““Double, double toil and trouble . . .”” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

AT HOME WITH POEMS

Tips for homeschoolers, and all parents, on inspiring families with verse.

By Susan Thomsen

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When she was a tiny girl, one of Karen Edmisten’s daughters took a shine to Emily Dickinson. Edmisten, a freelance writer and homeschooling mom in the Midwest, recently recalled what it was like to hear a poetry-besotted four-year-old reciting the Belle of Amherst:

Because I could not stop for deff
He kindwee stopped for me
The cawwiage held but just aw-selves
and immortowity.

The young Dickinson fan is one of at least 1.1 million homeschooled children in the United States. For some, their parents’ enthusiasm for poetry and literature has been translated into lesson plans and family closeness and fun. How do these parents do it? We talked with Edmisten, several other parent-teachers, and a librarian with homeschooling expertise about their recipes for success.

One poetry-loving homeschooler, North Carolinian Jenny C., read and reread Shel Silverstein as a child. Now she’s introducing poetry to her five- and seven-year-olds in hopes that they will learn to treasure the written word too. The plan seems to be working. On Fridays the family snuggles on the couch while Jenny reads a preselected poem that fits in with the rest of their theme-based studies. “I . . . am usually greeted with a cry of ‘Read one more!’” Some favorite anthologies include William Cole’s *A Zooful of Animals* and Elise Paschen’s *Poetry Speaks to Children*, which comes with a CD of poets reading their own works. Jenny also matches up poems and artwork for their studies of

the individual United States. For the unit on Massachusetts, for example, the family chose David McCord's "Islands in Boston Harbor" and the rhyming stories of Dr. Seuss, who was born in Springfield.

Kids don't have to hear this part, but guess what? The homeschoolers' approach of using poetry to foster broader learning is supported by scientific research. "Writing and listening to poetry, for example, sharpen a child's developing ability to hear (and ultimately to segment) the smallest sounds in words, the phonemes," notes cognitive neuroscientist and Tufts professor Maryanne Wolf in *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*.

For the child under five, Mother Goose verses provide "a host of potential aids to sound awareness—alliteration, assonance, rhyme, repetition." It can be difficult to find all kinds of reading materials for children between five and eight years old. Material for older grade levels may be too challenging, and books written for younger kids may feel "babyish." Poetry offers a solution that's perfect for the homeschooling parent, who can choose texts appropriate to each child. "I use poetry with slow readers, those who cannot possibly get through a long story or novel but who can understand and relish the message a poem conveys," writes poet and anthropologist Lee Bennett Hopkins in the guide *Pass the Poetry, Please!* "Poems, being short, are not demanding or frustrating to these readers."

In an amusing entry on her blog, Farm School, Becky S. recounts "how I got my kids to like poetry and broccoli." She writes, "It didn't happen by accident, though it didn't require a lot of work, either." Both were always around, and her daughter and two sons grew accustomed to indulging in the same savory fare that their parents prefer. Becky often lets her children choose what they want to hear. The family, who lives in western Canada, is particularly fond of poetry for all sorts of occasions, from holidays to cleaning the house. *Favorite Poems Old and New*, edited by Helen Ferris, comes in handy. The Farm School kids also memorize and recite poems. "It's a mistake and a terrible disservice to children to underestimate them," Becky says.

An adult who didn't grow up immersed in verse might not know where to begin choosing poems for children. Adrienne Furness, of the Webster (New York) Public Library, has come to the rescue, offering some reliable starting places. A children's librarian and the author of the recently published *Helping Homeschoolers in the Library*, Furness recommends the following books, all "well-designed and engaging."

- *The Random House Book of Poetry for Children*, edited by Jack Prelutsky. "Most homeschoolers approach subjects in a multidisciplinary way. This excellent collection is sorted into broad categories, including poems by writers past and present—even Shakespeare. A great investment."

- *A Kick in the Head: An Everyday Guide to Poetic Forms*, edited by Paul B. Janeczko. A solid resource "for people who think they don't know anything about poetry."

- Lee Bennett Hopkins' anthologies in HarperCollins' "I Can Read!" series. "The poems themselves are exactly the right level for someone on the threshold of reading independently."

The Poetry Foundation's online archives contain a number of possibilities well-suited to an afternoon break. In the beginning, sample one and see how it goes. Here are just a few:

- "Fish," by Mary Ann Hoberman. Delectable wordplay.
- "Baby Ate a Microchip," by Neal Levin. Just plain funny.
- "If You Catch a Firefly," by Lilian Moore. For nature lovers.
- "The Highwayman," by Alfred Noyes. A suspenseful (if rather bloody) longer poem.
- "Song of the Witches," from Macbeth, by William Shakespeare. No need to save it for Halloween. "Double, double toil and trouble . . ."

Susan Thomsen blogs about children's books at Chicken Spaghetti. This article originally appeared on www.poetryfoundation.org. Explore more children's poetry resources at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/programs/children.html>.

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