

Thinking creatively

Making the familiar unfamiliar is a way of stimulating older children (and indeed ourselves) to think creatively and build their vocabulary and ability to express themselves. Children's author **Angela James** suggests some ways parents and teachers can engage them in reading, talking, and writing.

As a children's author and a Creative Writing visitor for schools, I work to motivate children's imaginations, so that they engage with words for improving their own creative writing skills.

Words are a powerful tool, but in a world where everyone is subjected to increasing levels of data, our brains continually sort the familiar from the unfamiliar. The result is a sort of 'switching off' from the familiar. We observe it less. When that happens, there is a risk of losing creative imagination.

Think about visiting a holiday destination for the first time. Everything is new. You notice the smells, the sights, the temperature and the sounds; the first meal you eat may trigger a host of sensations with the flavours, textures, colours and aromatic smells. Now move to the end of your holiday. The route to the beach is now familiar so are you even thinking about how to get there? Are you seeing the shop window displays with the same zeal, or aware of the smell of the place anymore? If not, then your brain is already filtering out the familiar.

To stimulate children into thinking creatively with words, it helps to make the familiar unfamiliar again so that they can experience something in a new way. They need guidance to become more aware and observant, but they also need to increase their vocabulary to express themselves and their writing in a creative and imaginative way.

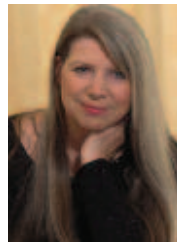
How?

- Encourage children to read books. The more they read, the more they will learn how other writers are using words and language to convey meaning. It will also broaden their vocabulary.
- Read poetry with them. Try limericks for fun and explore unusual words – what is a *Jabberwock* or a *Heffalump*? Visit the library and search for classic and contemporary poets for children.

- Buy a special book for them to write their own poetry in. Short poetry forms like haiku are a brilliant way to use words to maximum effect in a limited structure.
- Try different ideas for writing stories – they don't have to be written in a book. With index cards, write one word on each card and lay them in order on the floor to make a curving snake to take the reader on a journey around the room. Or, use the cards to write short stories under fifty words. Then file them in an index box as a short story collection.
- Our senses are important for generating good descriptive writing. Give children an opportunity of engaging all five senses in one go using an edible item. The experience will influence them on how to use their senses for their own writing. This example uses small citrus fruits. Ask the children to close their eyes and open their hands. Place the fruit in their hands. With their eyes still shut let them feel the shape, texture and temperature (touch). Ask the children to open their eyes (sight). Was it what they expected? Tell them to put the fruit near their ear and then break into the fruit skin with a fingernail. What did they hear? (sound). Then sniff the fruit (smell) before finally peeling and eating it (taste). Did the fruit smell and taste the same or different?
- Ask them to look in a mirror and describe their face. Give praise for imaginative descriptions such as, 'My eyes are like roasted chestnuts.' Find out if they notice anything unfamiliar.
- Start children off with the beginning of a story and let them finish it.
- Have a pretend magic carpet ride with them. Invent a story about where each of you would go – perhaps to a world of chocolate or a football match with all the best players in the world.
- Give them a pocket note book and pencil, and become 'Logo Hunters.' There are vast numbers of car logos, shop logos and business logos. Let



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the children choose a logo and see how many times they spot it in a day. It's assisting children to observe and pay attention, in addition to understanding that symbols are a method of communicating information.

- Ask about routine things. For example, is washing up or going to bed exciting? Usually the answer is 'No'. But what if you tell them that every bubble in the washing up bowl is a magic wish and every time the bowl is emptied, magic wishes are thrown away? Or, what if at bedtime they find a pair of magic slippers that can take them anywhere they want to go?

Work at turning the familiar into the unfamiliar – make it inspiring and full of creative imagination. When children see that the ordinary can become the extraordinary, their reading and creative writing will blossom. Know that with your encouragement, they will continue along their journey of words and gain creative writing skills that will last them a lifetime.

Angela James is a children's author; *The Theft of the Black Diamond* is her new fantasy novel for children. For more information please visit her website <http://angelajamesauthor.co.uk>