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What is the learning potential of children's picture books? A content analysis of one type of naturalistic input

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Abstract: A substantial amount of recent research has focused on whether children can learn from pictures books. However, no previous research has characterized the learning potential of fictional picture books that are widely available and read to children. In the present study, we coded 50 bestselling and 50 randomly-selected children's picture books for their learning potential along a number of dimensions. Borrowing from children's literary theory to create the coding scheme, we found that 79.5% of books had didactic intent; 62.5% contained moral lessons and 17% contained natural facts. Of those books containing morals, the majority were implicit. Impossible events were more common than ordinary or improbable ones, whereas settings and characters were predominately realistic. Sitting at the intersection of cognitive development, education, and literary theory, this work provides an important characterization of what is available in naturalistic input. We discuss the implications of book content and format of presentation for different types of learning.