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First Pictures, Early Concepts: Early Concept Books

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Abstract

This article focuses on a largely neglected book type for small children, picture books printed on thick cardboard that show pictures of common everyday objects such as ball, an apple or a chair, but with little text than object labels. The authors propose that these books should be called early concept books since their main purpose is to support the child's acquisition of concepts by looking at pictures. After describing three outstanding examples in more detail (Mim Chindli, The First Picture Book, Erste Bilder), the article deals with visual, linguistic, and literary aspects of this book type.



First Pictures, Early Concepts: Early Concept Books

Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer

The earliest picture books read to children are filled with pictures of common objects—such as a ball, teddy bear, apple, chair, or dog—printed on cardboard, plastic, wood, or cloth pages. Their titles may refer to implied users (*For Our Child, Baby's First Book*), depicted objects (*First Things, What Is That?*), or the books' pictures (*First Pictures, Pictures for the Little Ones*). Sometimes the title stresses the act of seeing (*Come and See!, Look!*) or that the book or objects belong to a young child (*My First Picturebook, That Is Mine*). These books usually do not contain much text, often just a single word denoting the objects. The images are color drawings or photographs in color or black and white. Such books circulate widely. We believe that all children in Western cultures are familiar with one or more books of this type when they are about twelve months old.

The most common term for this type of book is “baby book,” which correctly indicates that they are for young children. The term baby book sometimes refers to most books for young children, from simple board books to complex I-Spy books; it is too general a term for the scope of this article. Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott use the term “exhibition book” as it focuses on the act of exhibiting things (*How Picturebooks Work* 6). A more suitable term seems to be the Danish notion “pegebog” (pointing book), which stresses an important aspect of the routine of picture book looking (Christensen 21). We would like to propose a more specific term: the early concept book.

This phrase seems appropriate as the pictures displayed in these books are vehicles to support the child's acquisition of early concepts, such as apple or ball. A concept comprises the knowledge that the child needs to be able to refer to a given thing or entity. This process is intimately connected with the acquisition of pictorial and literary competence.



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