



## Weaving Webs of Stories

### Bulgarian Story

#### What Went Well and Suggestions

**What reading brings to children: comfort and reassurance, confidence and security, relaxation, happiness and fun. It feeds their imagination, helps them to see the world from other people's points of view and it even improves their sleeping patterns.**

**Alison David, author of  
Help Your Child Love Reading**

#### 1. Reading for pleasure.

Even before we start working with children we need to persuade the ones who will perform the whole thing – i.e. ourselves. If only we are convinced how necessary reading is, we can convey verbally or non-verbally this message to the group. Why are we supposed to encourage children to read when all they do at school is read. First of all, we should differentiate between reading as a chore and reading for fun. Research proved that children who read for pleasure do better in a wide range of subjects at school. One of the participants in WWS classes was a girl who read a lot and wrote exquisite short stories. One would suppose she would take up literature or language classes but she chose mathematics instead. At she excels in that. I just hope she will never give up reading and writing for pleasure. It is strongly believed that reading positively impacts children's wellbeing. And I understand why – we had a girl who initially refused to read aloud in front of the group and the others said “Leave her, she cannot read, she never reads in class.” That girl was 11. In my experience, those who struggle with reading inevitably struggle with the school curriculum in general. Children who find it really challenging to read aloud in the classroom, for instance, very often are mocked by their classmates and



hence the setback remains not only untackled but it escalates later in high school leaving some of the children almost illiterate.

We can blame all the devices children are addicted to – unsurprisingly, the move to online schooling led school-aged children to spend many hours a day in front of screens, interacting with their teachers and classmates. But our first meetings with children were face-to-face before the pandemic and lockdowns started and even then children found it hard to set aside their mobile phones during our one-hour meetings. We used to collect feedback at the end of every session and one of the girls said she enjoyed the activities very much but that was one of the toughest hours in her life because she had put away her mobile. By the way, it was the same girl who found it hard to read aloud but wouldn't miss our WWS meetings.

What happened with her? Well, by the end of the course she was volunteering to read first short texts and then the longer ones and then she would just chose the texts she enjoyed and paid no attention to their length.

How did it happen? We made reading fun. A game. They forgot it is a chore. Or a challenge. I hope reading turns into a habit.

That was one of our ambitions – to turn reading (and writing) into a habit. Because they are great habits. However, like all habits, they need repetition and regularity to establish themselves. In order for us as tutors to be able to build this habit, we need to establish connections, we need time, and we need to provide inspiration to the children to do what they are best at – connect, create and grow.

So, I think we answered the question why we need to get children engaged with reading – to increase their confidence, encourage language development and improve their life chances.

## 2. How to persuade the parents.

### Persuade the school staff/teachers/librarian

**“Children need art and stories and poems and music as much  
as they need love and food and fresh air and play. “**

**Philip Pullman**

We would start by saying that any given parent, teacher, librarian knows their children much better than us. Because we never met them. So, what we can do is share our experience, our discoveries and thoughts in case someone finds them useful. And also, we did a lot of reading while working on this project. That reading as usual was a valuable ally. A list of reference books is attached to the project documentation.

The number one principle is – kids do not listen to words, they follow examples. So, to raise a reading child, one needs to be a reading parent. Or a reading teacher.

If children fear reading (and in my work I have encountered a child who closes her eyes when she is to read a short text, as if she is blinded by “the light of the letters”!), we can cure this fear by... reading.

Since reading is a problem, if we do not focus on the reading itself but go round – play with it. What I do is I find a way to initiate some sort of a theater performance – I am the director and they are actors, so we rehearse a play. Or I always have some stuffed toys at hand and some teddy bear or doggie could be very sad and the only way to cheer them up is singing a song or reading a story. Most children are really embarrassed to sing, so they put up with reading a story. And I always encourage them, no matter how much they struggle with reading. They need to feel supported, any praise of accomplishment provokes appetite to do more of the same – that is, reading.

And the best tip for a parent is – children do not listen, they copy. They copy attitudes, behavior, patterns, habits. A parent needs to be a role model for their child.





Blame it on the rules of the game and chose together which sounds better then the others. It is a great source for discussing vocabulary without even mentioning the word vocabulary to the young reader. And you would be surprised how enriching this game is for the vocabulary of your child.

**Step Three.** Make the reading engaging – use role play, be ready to use different voices for different characters. One of my happiest childhood memories is my father reading a story about a parrot who was constantly trying to attract attention of his owner – my father was obviously so good at impersonating this character and I was laughing so much that my mother rushed in to see what was going on.

Step... and there are so many steps to follow. Once the journey is started, you can go on with your own road map. Follow your child's laughter and their passion. Follow your instinct as a parent.

Why we do it? Reading out loud to each other teaches children to listen carefully, speak fluently and read for pleasure.

**“If you  
love to read, or learn to love reading, you  
will have an amazing life. Period. Life will  
always have hardships, pressure, and  
incredibly annoying people, but books will  
make it all worthwhile. In books, you will  
find your North Star, and you will find  
you, which is why you are here.”**

**Anne Lamott**

**A velocity of Being: Letters to a Young Reader**

School librarians are a great source of inspiration to children. One of the schools we have been working with had a by-the-book sort of a librarian – she knew how to virtually provoke children to read a book. Sometimes all she needed to say is “Well, we have this book but I think maybe you are too young for it.” She confessed that had always worked.

### 3. What did we do in Bulgaria?

All of the above. And much more, of course. We realized that with the start of the lockdowns it would be nearly impossible to follow any of the programs we have written initially.

With some of the children we managed to meet before pandemic started, and we followed our concept of building trust, understanding, rules and communication before we do anything else.

**“You can't hate someone whose story you know.”**

**Margaret J. Wheatley**

As EMPATHY is in the core of all values promoted by WWS Project and the very basic definition of empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, we started with an activity in which all children learned a lot about each other. And with this, some level of mutual acceptance, understanding and knowledge was reached. What I did to introduce the term is I presented a small turtle whose name is Empatia, shared with them her story and asked them if they knew what is empathy.

In the times of isolation, lack of touch and normal human interactions we managed to create a safe space where children could meet online and maintain the contact with their peers. And create new type of communication and relationships. And especially during this turmoil relationships matter. Stories help children connect with their friends.

Presenting themselves and their peers builds on their confidence, makes one feel seen and heard, helps us enhance the group energy.

We chose books which the children read and like, and elaborated them – we did role play, we impersonated different animals, we laughed, sketched the characters and made up stories about them.

And soon after our first meetings there started the lockdown. Our question how shall we maintain communication with the children found a good temporary solution – we recorded videos of story reading. The script was written by us, and the structure is – first, a brief introduction to the ideas of



the book/short story, presenting (with the help of some toys) the main characters of the book. Secondly, the tutor reads the text with some classical music as a background. So, now, the brains of the children, after listening to the text at least once, are prepared to do the reading without the help of the tutor. All they need is to include the element of gamification – for instance, role play or making comic strips or any other activity we can think of. In any case, the tutor is the one who starts first, in order to give them a sense of what is possible and provide ideas how to start.

With the online schooling, one of the ways for us to keep in touch with the children and also give them the urge to read were the videos we have been recording. In each video I read a short story or a poem with some classical music as a background. Our youtube channel hosted those recorded videos and feedback from different children encouraged us to continue with the recordings.

Later we started online training sessions – both with reading and comprehending different texts and with activities for writing compelling story outlines, dialogue and lively characters.

How did we do it? By not focusing on the act of writing but rather on provoking creativity. Writing as a game.

Here again the old toys come in handy – children have met them, they know their personality now and one can start improvising with some of them. Asking them to write letters on behalf of their toys. Asking to re-write a familiar story by inserting his or her toy is a great way to provoke the story to be read and remembered.

What we have noticed is that children cherish writing together with the teacher / trainer / parent. These shared moments of creativity are precious and they further connect the child, the book and the process. What happened was they could not tire of creating stories with their own toys, exchanging stories with the others about their toys.

And then each child reads out loud the story they had prepared, and to keep the audience busy I introduced a new rule. While listening to what the others have written, the question they needed to follow was “What did I like



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about this work?” (The answer “everything” is not accepted by the rules of the game)

Giving children the advocacy. Initially, asking them to give ideas for creative challenges. Later – giving them the wheel. They were “teachers”, prepared lesson plan and facilitated the whole process.

We worked with these children for a long period of time. We developed special connection with them.

Probably the most valuable feedback we had from them was – you help us grow, you help us mature and be better human beings.