

Why kids need poetry in their lives, and how to spark their interest in it

By **Jason Basa Nemec**

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When Amanda Gorman gifted us with her inaugural poem, “The Hill We Climb,” I was sitting on our basement couch, sandwiched between my 2-year-old and my 5-year-old. Juni had her head on my chest. EJ, my older daughter, was drawing a picture of herself at the top of a mountain. And when Gorman got to the line about dreaming of becoming president, I was so moved — in part because EJ has her own version of this dream, hoping to be the first Filipina American president of the United States — I could feel myself shaking.

“Did you like the poem?” I asked EJ after it was finished.

“I loved it,” she said.

I did too. And I was thrilled to see that other people around the world were celebrating Amanda Gorman right along with us. While poetry matters a lot in our house (I’ve been teaching EJ poetry class since before she turned 3), I know that not everybody is as readily moved by words as I am. That said, I think kids benefit when parents and caregivers help them experience the world through poetry.

“The poet’s role is to tell the truth. That was the beauty of what Amanda did. She told the truth,” says [Bridgette Bianca](#), a poet from South Central Los Angeles and an assistant professor at Santa Monica College who cites poetry’s way of expressing complex ideas, often in a short, simple format, as a benefit for kids.

Expressive arts, including poetry, are important for a child’s social-emotional development, according to clinical psychologist Dianne Jandrasits. Adults can create a secure attachment with kids by actively reading with them, especially between the ages of 0 and 5, and the sound of poetry can make the process fun. Poetry, Jandrasits says, can help a child learn to take a perspective and to understand someone else’s feelings. For a young child, she says, “it all starts with someone understanding your feelings. And that’s where parents and caregivers come in.”

Okay, but what *is* poetry? Ask five poets and you’ll likely get five definitions. Dave Lucas, a lecturer at Case Western Reserve University and the former poet laureate of Ohio, says: “Poetry is that place where language is pleasure and not just communication. It’s not just a hammer; it’s a hammer that we also love to look at and we love to use.”

It’s pretty simple. Poetry is music. It’s about playing with language and sound. And kids love to play.

“Kids are there already,” says Lucas, who wrote a newspaper column in 2018-2019 called “Poetry For People Who Hate

Poetry.” He talked about sharing poems with kindergartners, and how much kids love it when you tell them to just have fun, make some rhymes, and be silly. When you take language, he says, “and all of a sudden take the rules out of it, mess around and see what happens, you give them that sandbox experience, out of which so much creativity happens in the first place.”

The problem, though, is that as kids get older, they lose that interest in playing with words. “I think we teach it out of them for the most part,” Lucas says.

Author and poet Kate Baer agrees. “What I think happens is that kids get to school and have some negative experience with poetry. Either because it’s inaccessible or boring, or it’s labeled in a way that has negative connotations. Like it’s weird, or too artsy.

“Kids want to laugh,” adds Baer, who is also a mom of four. “That’s a lot of what they want out of literature, especially at a young age.” In addition to classics such as “Where the Sidewalk Ends” by Shel Silverstein, she cited “Sing to the Sun” by Ashley Bryan and “A Maze Me: Poems for Girls” by Naomi Shihab Nye as examples of other excellent books of poems that keep things accessible for young readers.

“You don’t need to be intimidated by the form of poetry,” says writer Pamela K. Santos, who identifies as a Pinayorker, a Filipina raised in New York City. “The thing I love about younger minds, is that their imagination is so elastic. The form is just a way to give a container to it.” Santos, who is also a mother, recommends showing kids many different types of poetry, especially those that don’t rhyme, and asking them what they notice. How many lines does the poem have? Does it repeat a word? Is the ending surprising?

When writing poetry with my 5-year-old at our makeshift home-school, I often encourage her to come up with a sentence, then ask if she wants the next sentence to rhyme with it or not. We’ve built some fantastic little poems this way, many of them no more than four or eight lines long.

Another possible benefit to reading poetry, Jandrasits says, is that it can help develop kids’ problem-solving skills. “Because if there is no right or wrong answer, but we could see the perspective of another through the process, wouldn’t we arrive at better solutions?”

Representation in poetry also matters. “Poetry helps to shape any individual’s identity kit,” says Daniel Gray-Kontar, the executive artistic director of Twelve Literary Arts, a nonprofit organization in Cleveland. He works primarily with children of color, and specifically with Black children, and referenced “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks and “Black Girl Magic” by Mahogany L. Browne as examples of essential poems for every Black child to know. “And if every Black child should know them, then every child should know them.”

“Harlem” by Langston Hughes was Bianca’s first exposure to a poem by a Black author in school. “In that poem about dreams, now suddenly I was a little Black kid thinking about what it meant to have a dream, what it meant to think of my life, and what I would do if I didn’t take advantage of that potential and do something with it,” she says. “What would happen to that dream? That’s a really deep thing to think about at 7 years old.”

Gray-Kontar, like all the poets I spoke to, mentioned how important it is for caregivers to pay attention to what it is that their young person seems to like, whether it’s a sport or some experience they’re a part of, and then to select poems for them based on those interests.

“Start with what’s available at your fingertips,” says Bianca. She suggests reaching out to a local librarian or looking up poetry readings online. The pandemic has been isolating for a lot of us, she says, but through poetry, we can connect

with people we wouldn't necessarily meet because they're outside our immediate community.

I'm not the first person to say it, and I won't be the last: it's been a hard year. Especially in the United States, where covid-19 has exposed the extreme race and class inequities that have existed in this country in various forms for centuries.

Amanda Gorman wrote: "We did not feel prepared to be the heirs / of such a terrifying hour / but within it we found the power / to author a new chapter / to offer hope and laughter / to ourselves."

With these lines in mind, if you're searching for a way to offer a little hope and laughter to a child in your life, look and listen for poetry. It's in the air all around you. And it's in you, too. I promise.

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