

Character Education and Children's Books

An author's perspective from: Gill Pittar, Author of the Milly, Molly Books.

(delivered to the official launch of Milly, Molly Books by Beijing Normal University Press in 5 major cities in PR China – August 2005)

Good afternoon to you all.

I am a wife of 35 years, a mother of four, a grandmother of four, and lastly, a writer.

Reading to my children was always a joy but it frustrated me that it was impossible to find good storybooks with underlying values that would help build character. It wasn't until my grandchildren began to arrive that I had the time to take the matter into my own hands and start writing books that I thought would help children grow into confident, self assured young adults.

I was fortunate enough to receive the best education available but left school without the social skills to use it. I was shy, lacked in confidence and my communication skills were appalling. Therefore, I was determined to do all I possibly could to ensure my grandchildren had the best start in life and the social skills to go on to achieve their full potential.

Reading Is The Secret To Everything!

- It is well documented that a child who is read to from a very early age has an immediate and lasting advantage.
- Reading is the key to knowledge.
- Reading develops a thirst for knowledge and an inquiring, interested mind.
- Children who grow up with books in their homes and children, who see their parents enjoy reading, learn to love reading themselves.
- Reading and achieving are synonymous.

Academic Education Alone Is Not Enough.

- During the last decade we have seen children driven to acquire university degrees.
- An academic education is a necessity, without doubt, but must be accompanied by character education from a young age.
- A good children's book is the perfect vehicle for teaching character education.

I have seen high academic achievers slip into obscurity time and time again. The children with confidence and good people skills, teamed with knowledge, rise above the others.

What Constitutes a Good Children's Book?

A good children's book must have:

- Colourful pictures
- No more than three or four lines of text to a page.
- It must engage the child's imagination.
- The story must move at a brisk pace and be short – 24 pages, a reading time of 7 minutes is ideal.
- The story must have a satisfying ending or some sort of resolution.

Children are quick to tell you if they like a book or not and will ask for a favourite over and over again. They enjoy rhyme, repetition and suspense.

The Ideal Reading Environment

- Make sure story time is a quiet time when a child is relaxed and comfortable.
- Encourage participation.
- Welcome questions.
- Always answer a child's question honestly.
- Encourage a child to share his or her opinion

In a loving and secure environment children learn to articulate their opinions and ideas and develop early communication skills. Within a group a child learns to listen to others opinions and accept that everyone is entitled to their own opinion.

Character Education

- Children must learn sound values and life skills to grow strong in character.
- Character education develops self-esteem and self-confidence.
- With self-confidence come good people skills, communication skills and social skills.
- Children with a balanced education, one that includes character education, are destined to be leaders.

Character Education In A Global Context

- Character education has traditionally been neglected in most countries.
- Who is responsible for character education? Parents or schools? The answer is both – one reinforces and complements the other.
- Character education is now being introduced into core curriculum worldwide.
- Milly, Molly has become the character education program of choice for parents and teachers and is now contracted to 103 countries and in 23 languages.

Young students today are complimenting their educations with experience in other countries – exchange students, sport and cultural trips and university scholarships. Many

go on to take up career positions in foreign lands. These challenging experiences require a sound foundation in character education.

What Makes Milly, Molly Books So Successful?

- Core values never date.
- Milly, Molly books cross all barriers of race, colour and creed.
- Milly, Molly books are firstly good stories.
- The stories are true to life.
- They are stories a child can relate to and identify with.
- Most of the stories are based in the natural world and wherever possible include animals.
- The language is lively and exciting.
- The values contained in the Milly, Molly stories are implicit, never explicit. This style sets the books apart from most other values based material and makes the books easily adaptable to different teaching methods and philosophies.
- A child that is too young to comprehend the value can simply enjoy the story.
- A value told in the context of a story is likely to be remembered. Children can recall the story, remember the value and use it when they find themselves in a similar situation.
- Milly, Molly books encourage thought, discussion and change.

Milly, Molly books have been endorsed by professors of Literature and Linguistics, child psychologists and leading authors of children's books.

Issues That Face The Children Of Today.

The world is now quite different from the one I grew up in. Children are coming face to face with issues that didn't exist for my generation as the world gets a smaller and smaller place. Different cultures are working and playing together, telecommunications are bringing us into each other's homes, while the advertising media dictates what we should wear, eat and look like.

I would like to touch very briefly on some of the major issues that confront our children today, to demonstrate the depth and breadth of material covered in the Milly, Molly stories.

Acceptance of Diversity:

- Multi-cultural societies are now the norm. While there are obvious differences, we all share many of the same feelings, interests, like and dislikes. Milly and Molly promote the acceptance of diversity with the message "*We may look different but we feel the same.*" (Milly and Molly's Monday, Milly, Molly and the Ferryman)
- Children must be encouraged to learn about and embrace new and different cultures. (Milly, Molly and Alf)

- Acceptance of physical or mental difference. Children born with the disadvantage of a handicap have the same right to live full and happy lives and are encouraged rightly to get out and about. These children require the encouragement and support of their peers.(Milly, Molly and the Stowaways)
- Acceptance of family diversity. No two families are the same – they can be big, small, multi racial or divided. Children must learn to be respectful of the variations and at the same time be comfortable with the dynamics of their own family.(Milly, Molly and Different Dads)

Health Issues:

- **Obesity:** With the trend for take away food, packaged food and pressure from advertising it takes education and strength of character to buck the trend. (Milly, Molly and Junior Joe)
- **Exercise:** This is a TV and computer age. Children need to be educated about the advantages of exercise, encouraged to play sport and supported in their efforts. (Milly, Molly and the Tree Hut)
- **Nutrition:** The importance of a nutritious diet to a child's ability to concentrate, learn and maintain good health cannot be underestimated. (Milly, Molly and the Runaway Bean)

Obesity, diabetes, asthma and depression among children is escalating. These ills are all consequences of poor nutrition and lack of exercise.

A recent study suggested exercise at an early age was critical to the development of a child's brain. Exercise improves co-ordination, concentration and memory retention. In the study, five year old children who had grown up with a predominantly outdoors lifestyle but could not read when they first went to school advanced faster than those who could read but were averse to exercise.

Children need the support of schools and families to change lifestyles.

Peer Pressure.

Children need values education to grow in character and confidence so that they can resist peer pressure and make the right decisions for themselves.
(Milly, Molly and Henry)

Bullying

Bullying is a growing problem in western cultures. The weaker children, children with a low self esteem or children who don't fit in for whatever reason are picked on. Communities need the support of families and teachers to halt this distressing trend. And children must develop the strength of character to support each other stand up to the perpetrators.
(Milly, Molly and Beefy)

Sudden Death

Because of the speed, stress and ills of modern life, car accidents, heart attacks, and cancers are more common. Children today are having to cope with the loss of parents, siblings, and friends, when in my day the passing of grandparents was usually the first experience of death.

(Milly, Molly and Jimmy's Seeds)

Planet Under Threat

This generation of children is going to have to embrace the problems that threaten the world as we know it to ensure the world's survival. Air pollution, the felling of trees, urban sprawl and destruction of animal habitat are but a few of the pressing issues that face this generation.

(Milly, Molly and Mipper, Milly, Molly and the Oak Tree, Milly and Molly Save the Animals)

Social Responsibility

Famine, poverty, disease and AIDs have become global issues that will take the cooperation of all nations to eradicate.

(Milly, Molly and the Pumpkin Seeds)

Today eight books containing forty-eight bilingual stories are being released in China. I have made reference to only a handful this afternoon.

Children's books need to be pushed now more than ever before books as TV and computers compete for a child's attention and time. I have endeavored to write topical, realistic and fun literature to make that task easier for parents and children. More specifically, I have written the Milly, Molly books to help children develop the tools required to build character and the social skills necessary to meet the challenges of the 21st century and to go on to enjoy rich, purposeful and productive lives.

I guess I can thank my own shortcomings and the arrival of my grandchildren for the will to write the Milly, Molly books. While I imagined Milly and Molly might reach a few children in New Zealand, I never imagined their influence would be as far reaching as China. I feel very humbled to be given this opportunity to help your children and grandchildren too.

Thank you.
