

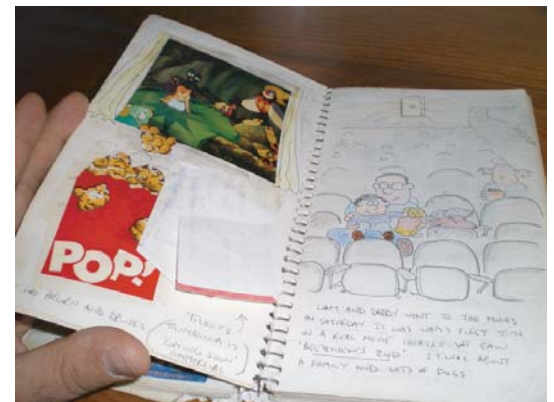
Memory Catching with Experience Books

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I was introduced to experience books by my friend Mary Koch. She showed me beautiful notebooks full of precious mementos, drawings and photos of her family and their experiences. It was created for her children at the time that these experiences were happening. For her children. At the time these experiences were happening. Experience books are different than scrap books. A stick drawing here, a significant bandaid there: their beauty is in the relationship to the child's own experience. Unlike a scrapbook, experience books worry more about capturing the day we fell off our bike, got lost in the mall or went camping with Dad than we worry about making sure the page is pretty. Its not that the experience books of Mary and her family were not exceptionally beautiful. They are. The real impact of those books was in the feeling that as I looked at the clippings, opened the envelopes, and lifted the flaps, I was part of their experience. I felt some of the feelings their family felt as those experiences were happening. Imagine the impact of those mementos on her children as they look through those books and relive important times throughout their important years. Experience books are better than store bought books. The story you read to your child is his own.

Children learn to talk first about things that are happening at the time in front of them: The "Here and Now". As they grow in language and listening they learn to talk about things that are going to happen tomorrow, two sleeps from now or even last summer: The "Then and There". This "Then and There" is more challenging to the beginner conversationalist. This challenge is healthy, valuable work that will help to develop the language skills your child needs. Bringing out a souvenir or showing a drawing of the "Then and There" topic can help make the conversation easier to understand and also make that topic more alive and real and interesting for your child. Here is an example. A child came to his session one morning to see me with his mother. His mother said "Oliver, tell Dave what happened yesterday". Oliver just sat there. "Tell Dave what happened at your school". Oliver just sat and looked at me. "Did you have to go to the Doctor?". Still, Oliver said nothing. His mother took out a jar and in the jar sat 6 large white dried beans. Oliver looked at the beans and smiled and then started to tell me in his own way about putting those beans up his nose at daycare and having to see the doctor to get them out.

I created an experience book with my son, who is now 18. He still picks up that book to look through it and relive memories. In my sessions with families I always encouraged them to create experience books. I think it is the most powerful language tool we can employ. I love to draw, so in my child's book I draw. This is not necessary. A stick figure is fine. A trimmed photo and a baggie with collected items from that experience is better. Here is a page from my son's experience book. We went to a movie he really liked. Before we went to the movie we started the page. We talked about where we were going, what we were going to do, what we would see...Then we went to the movie. I collected things as we experienced the movie together. I saved the popcorn bag. I saved the movie tickets. I grabbed a movie magazine that had images I could cut out from the movie we saw. When we got home we added to our movie page. I cut the picture from our magazine that showed the movie and drew curtains beside it. I cut the popcorn bag into a small bag shape, glued it in....



continued...

...and drew popcorn coming out the top. I taped in our movie tickets.

With an experience book I keep to one experience to the two open pages facing the child. If you have one experience on the left and another on the right it can lead to confusion in the conversation. Some families also have experience boxes. In the shoebox are small treasures from many different experiences. The treasure gives less help than an experience book with two full pages of mementos. "Remember this?" as you bring a baggie with sand and shells from the box. What story does that item hold?

Here are some steps and some tips for making valuable experience books or boxes...

1. I like to use a file folder for each experience. Open it up and glue or draw directly onto the inside of your folder. White ones work best. The sturdy folder is better than the paper in a book. Carry the folder around so that your child can show it off and have more conversations about the experience with grandparents, babysitters, neighbors or other important people. If you do want to use a book, sketch books are great. The paper is thick, you can rip out mistakes, and they are relatively cheap to buy. Make sure you decorate your sketch book on the outside with your child's picture and a title (eg. "All about Oliver: Volume 1").

2. Look for inspiration in the store bought books that are designed to entertain children at your child's age level. For younger children books have flaps, envelopes, windows, things to feel and things to move. Glue pictures of Mommy, Daddy, and Baby onto cardboard backing and then attach each of these to a length of string. Tape the string to the middle of your experience page. Now you can walk Daddy "up up up" the slide and say "wweeeeee" as you slide him down. If your page has a sandbox drawn on it, glue real sand on the page. If your page is about bathtime, glue a small envelope on the page and have cut out cardboard shapes coloured to look like soap, a wash cloth, a boat, a toothbrush...

3. Use a digital camera if you have one. Digital cameras are great. We can print from our own computers so that we don't have to wait. In the old days I would ask "Did you make that experience page about making the cake together?" and a parent might say "We are waiting to use up the rest of the film before we get it developed". Experiences have a limited shelf life. If you wait the page you make will have less interest for your child. A great thing to add to a page is a series of pictures that show a sequence of steps: "Here is Mommy pouring the milk in the bowl. Now Oliver is putting in the powder. The cake is in the oven. Mmmmm. Chocolate icing!".

4. Don't limit your experience pages or boxes to showing only happy experiences. A popped balloon that made your baby cry. A bandaid with blood from the fall on the skateboard. A bag of broken windsheild glass from the car that was broken into. A page about when your child hid from you at the mall and everyone was upset can be a great thing to talk about too. Anything significant to your child is worth making an experience page about. Be a collector of mementos. Document everything for prosperity.

5. Each experience is a chance to teach new vocabulary. In this page of my son's book I use the gift of a hockey sweater and pants to teach the vocabulary of hockey.

6. The most important thing is to make the conversation fun. Don't force it. Follow your child's interest. Make sure that the talking and listening time is shared. Your child needs to learn a balance of listening and talking that is normal for conversation.

Have Fun!

