Once Upon a Time, Every Night

By Pam Morris, Early Learning Center director

Education as a career path and life goal began for me in 1992 with my graduation with a BS in Psychology from Binghamton University. That fall, I entered my master's program in Early Childhood Education at the same university, different school and I never looked back! With many relevant degrees, over 3 decades of hands-on experience, Early Childhood Education is my passion, my raison d'etre, my tachlit, my reason for being.

When I was a little girl, my favorite book was *The Laughing Book*, a Romper Room story (fellow Romper Room fans of a certain age, you know who you are). My mom and dad read it to me over and over, and what I remember most isn't just the book. It's the three of us laughing together, "A big ho, ho, ho and a hee, hee, hee and soon you will be laughing merrily" - loosely quoted as it has been a couple of years since it was read to me.I didn't know it then, but they were giving me so much more than a story.

Any parent who has read the same picture book 47 nights in a row knows two things. First, you could recite it in your sleep (and some nights you nearly do). Second, if you try to skip a page to speed up bedtime, your child will catch you. Every. Single. Time.

That small act of catching you is the magic of reading at work. Your child is predicting, remembering, and noticing when the story doesn't make sense. Those are the building blocks of literacy, happening in pajamas.

Research keeps confirming what teachers and grandparents have long known: children who are read to regularly hear far more words, and that vocabulary becomes the foundation for everything that follows. Reading together builds attention spans, teaches cause and effect, and helps children step into someone else's shoes. When a three-year-old worries whether the caterpillar will ever stop being hungry, she is practicing empathy. And the laughter matters too. Children learn best when they feel safe, close, and happy, and a shared giggle over a silly page does all three.

Next week, October 26–30, our Early Learning Center celebrates Once Upon a Story Week, and every classroom, from infants to kindergarten, will live inside a story. Monday is Favorite Book Day, so send a beloved book from home. Tuesday brings nursery rhymes, the original phonics lesson disguised as fun. Wednesday is all Dr. Seuss, complete with green eggs (science, not breakfast). Thursday we feast with The Very Hungry Caterpillar. On Friday, children dress as their favorite book character, and we welcome you to Character Shabbat at 3:00 PM. EVERYONE is encouraged to join

in the favorite character fun! Our older students are encouraged to spend the week writing and illustrating their own class books; maybe they will read their pages aloud to you. Bring tissues.

None of this is new for us. We are *Am HaSefer*, the People of the Book. Just weeks ago on Simchat Torah, we danced with the Torah and rolled it back to *Bereshit*, “In the beginning.” Each year we begin our greatest story again; learning is meant to be joyful.

Our children will also practice *kavod l’sefarim*, respect for books. A tiny thing with a big message: words matter, stories matter, learning matters.

In the Shema we are told *v’shinantam l’vanecha*, teach them to your children, when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way, when you lie down and when you rise up. I can’t think of a better description of reading with a child. On the couch. In the car. At bedtime, for the 48th time. *L’dor v’dor*, from generation to generation, the story is passed along one page at a time, just as my parents passed it to me.

So this week, pick up a book with your child. Do the silly voices. Let them turn the pages, even three at once. And laugh together.

Decades from now, they may not remember every word, but they will remember who was laughing with them.

#Shabbat Shalom