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CHILDREN AND POETRY

Marion Hilberry

Berea College

How do you get children to write poetry? For several years my husband and I have been interested in finding an answer to this question. As college teachers we have been particularly concerned about the numbers of good students who come to us reluctant to either write or read poetry. Our theory was that children at any age will take to poetry if they can be encouraged to make some poems themselves and to talk easily about the poems. This will lead, in turn, to their enjoyment of other poetry and all imaginative literature.

To test our theory we arranged to teach a few hours a week in the elementary school at Yellow Springs, Ohio. We set ourselves the task of getting these children to like poetry and to like writing it. Our first assumption was that since all children love rhyme, that would be a logical starting place. Taking the poem, "I Can't, Said the Ant," we asked the children to imitate the rhyme pattern. The plot was built around something happening in the kitchen and all the pots and pans and foods making comments. Children contributed individual lines to make up a whole poem. Here is an excerpt:

"She's hurt her chin!" said the gin.
"Let me fix her," said the mixer.
"Let's use tape," said the grape.
"Look there," said the pear.
"Mended with silk," said the milk.
"She looks stable," said the table.
"You've covered the crack," said the pack.
"Good work!" said the perk.
"Nothing to it!" said the fluid.
"Looks the same," said the flame.
"She'll break again," said a pen.

Somewhat older children proved they could manage the more complex limerick form:

There once was a fellow named Ned
Who was ugly and quite over-fed.
When asked of his weight
He just stood there and ate.
He was on a strict diet, he said.

After working with poems like these, we felt everyone had had

fun; we had established rapport and broken down prejudices against poetry. With slightly looser forms, the children sometimes began to loosen up and say what was on their minds. This cinquain, for example, is about as direct as it could get in its ambivalence:

Francie
 Very mean
 Very very nice
 I like her
 Sometimes.

And in this cinquain one can sense the exuberance of a high place:

Tree
 Hard bark
 Climb and see
 Look up at
 Me!

Then for several years we returned to our college teaching, convinced that children really do like poetry and can write it. We had far to go, however, in developing specific techniques for unleashing the emotion, the sensitivity, and the creativity that we knew were part of every child.

BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS—THE KOCH METHOD

The very techniques we were looking for and more, indeed a breakthrough in the teaching of poetry to children, came with the publication in 1970 of Kenneth Koch's *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* (New York: Chelsea House). Koch, a poet himself, had spent several hours a week during 1969 visiting Public School 61 in Manhattan, teaching poetry to elementary school children of all races, backgrounds, and abilities. He wanted to see if he could find a way for children to get as much from poetry as they do from painting. He says:

The power to see the world in a strong, fresh, and beautiful way is a possession of all children. And the desire to express that vision is a strong creative and educational force. If there is a barrier in its way, the teacher has to find a way to break that down or circumvent it. (p. 46)

Breaking down these barriers is what his book is all about, and he is explicit about how to do it. First, he insists you must take

children seriously as poets and believe they have a natural talent for poetry. Then you must remove some of the usual rules and conventions, putting little emphasis upon spelling and punctuation. While children are creating, give them perfect freedom; interest in what words mean and how they are spelled will follow.

Koch observes that children, unlike adults, write better in a classroom surrounded by young, excited writers with a teacher close at hand to encourage them than they do at home in perfect quiet. When we saw a movie of Koch teaching children to write in Manhattan (available through the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C.), we were impressed with the seeming chaos of the classroom, chaos that on closer observation turned out to be humming, thriving, joyous activity.

What does he suggest one should read to children to get them started writing? Other children's poetry seems to excite them more than anything else; it makes them want to write and it often suggests particular techniques. They are especially attentive to poetry, adult poetry too, just before they are going to write, particularly if the poem has something to do with what they are to write about. Before the color poems (one sort of poem he often asks children to write), he sometimes reads Walter de la Mare's "Silver." He finds D. H. Lawrence's "Trees in the Garden," "Nothing to Save," and "The White Horse" work effectively. We have found that children respond easily to many poems in the anthology *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle*, edited by Stephen Dunning, Edward Lueders, and Hugh Smith, and to poems by William Carlos Williams such as "This Is Just to Say" and "The Last Words of My English Grandmother."

The poems we find in *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*, all created by the children of P.S. 61, are undeniable proof that children can be taught to write poetry. But can Koch's suggestions and techniques work for other teachers in other classes? On a very limited scale, we have tried some of his approaches. Our conclusion is that any teacher who establishes a relaxed, friendly atmosphere, who encourages the children, and who loves poetry himself can use Koch's poetry assignments with success. Moreover, we discovered that once we understood his method, it was easy to create our own adaptations.

KOCH'S TECHNIQUES FOR STARTING POEMS

I would like to look now at a few of the devices Koch suggests for enabling children to write and show what his children did with

them—and occasionally what our children did. I will be using lines written individually or collaboratively by our daughters, 8 and 12, and by their boy cousins, 12 and 13. Later I will mention a few original approaches we worked out using Koch's method.

Koch argues that rhyme tends to inhibit the imagination and bring out contrived, conventional verse. But he acknowledges that some structure or pattern is necessary to get children's thoughts going. He always calls for a group collaboration poem at first to make the children less self-conscious. At the first meeting with his class, he asked everyone to make some rules about what should be in their poem. They decided to start with *I wish* and to have a color, a comic strip character, and a city or country in each line. The children responded with wild enthusiasm, each vying to get recognition for the line he had composed:

I wish I was Dick Tracy in a black suit in England.
I wish I were a Supergirl with a red cape; the city of Mexico
will be where I live.

We tried something similar with our own children and got these lines:

I wish I was with Princess Ann in bloody red England.
I wish I was with Mr. Smith at Oshtemo in a purple bathing suit.

Another time, Koch asked the students to write a poem with only one requirement, that each line start with *I wish*; the wishes might be as wild and crazy as they liked. A fourth grade girl wrote this poem:

I wish I had a pony with a tail like hair
I wish I had a boyfriend with blue eyes and black hair I would
be so glad
I wish I was Sleeping Beauty so I would go to sleep and they
would come and kiss me
I wish I had a daughter with blond hair and light green eyes
I wish I could be the biggest dancer in the world
I wish I had every miniskirt my sister has

—Milagros Diaz

Since comparisons are essential to poetry, writing them was one of Koch's early assignments. "Children are very good at them once they feel they are free to say whatever comes into their minds. Their perceptions haven't been as conditioned as ours by the sensible and the conventional and if the sky looks like a white mouse they are

capable of seeing it and, if they feel uninhibited, saying it.” (p. 105) He asked them to compare little things to big things, a mouse is like an elephant; and things in school to things outside school, the blackboard is as green as the sky. He was careful not to use formal terms such as *metaphor* or *simile*; in the primary grades he printed LIKE and AS in big letters on the blackboard and told the children to include one in each line.

Snowflakes are like shining diamonds
 A breeze is like the sky is coming to you
 The sun is like golden bright earrings

—Iris Torres

One form that all children liked but that older children responded to with special enthusiasm was *I used to/but now*, starting every odd line with *I used to* and every even line with *but now*. Usually there was a note of elation in the *but now* line.

I used to be a flower
 But now I am a color.

Our children wrote some lines following this pattern:

I used to be me
 But now I am I.
 I used to be leafy
 But now I'm a tree.
 I used to be watery
 But now I'm a pitcher.

Another Koch technique, one that we and other teachers had used before, is to ask children to write what a piece of music suggests to them. Our children produced this collaboration, stimulated by Louis Armstrong's music:

I see humming birds and giraffes
 I see hat and cane dancers
 I see houses moving, walking and dancing
 I see a grandmother standing on her head in the poppies

Koch used other devices I can only mention. His chapter headings give some clue to what they are: colors, noises, dreams, sestinas, the third eye, being an animal or thing, poems using Spanish words, and I Seem to Be/But Really I Am. But the most successful assignment called for the writing of lies. Telling a lie is a temptation to

most children, but being encouraged by a teacher to tell a whopper is irresistible. Koch explains, “Lying is a very quick way to the world of the imagination. It is also a competitive pastime. Like the Mississippi riverboat men in *Huck Finn*, the children at P.S. 61 were eager to do each other one better, to tell an even bigger, more astonishing untruth.” (p. 49) This approach worked extremely well in getting non-reading, non-writing children to participate. When writing was a problem, Koch had them say their poems out loud and he wrote them down himself—the language experience approach.

Here is one of the lie poems, one of the best of all the P.S. 61 writings:

The Dawn of Me
 I was born nowhere
 And I live in a tree
 I never leave my tree
 It is very crowded
 I am stacked up right against a bird
 But I won't leave my tree
 Everything is dark
 No light!
 I hear the bird sing
 I wish I could sing
 My eyes, they open
 And all around my house
 The Sea
 Slowly I get down in the water
 The cool blue water
 Oh and the space
 I laugh swim and cry for joy
 This is my home
 For Ever

—Jeff Morley, fifth grade

When we read this to our own children, our 8 year old, usually an avowed non-poet, composed this poem:

My mother is the sun
 My dad is the moon
 I am half sun, half moon.
 My cousin is a bird elephant.
 I have nine mothers and I have ten fathers.

I live in space.
 I have 1000 stars.
 My mother died when it turned dark.
 My father died when it turned light.
 I died when a bird snake bit me.

And her 12 year old sister wrote these lines of a strange, existential quality:

Yesterday I flew away and never came back.
 I am nowhere and nothing is anything and neither am I.
 I am a speck of air. I do nothing
 All day but float and sleep.
 This morning I ate seven boxes of flies and a piano.
 Today we covered the world with green stamps.

KOCH'S TECHNIQUES EXTENDED

Once we had worked with Koch's ideas, it was fun to invent a few of our own. Sometimes we asked children to take three words at random and work them into a poem. Or another approach—to ask an animal a question. We asked our children to look at some object for several minutes until they imagined it becoming something else:

I looked at the wall hanging until it flashed red lights.
 I looked at the cane until it became a tall toucan.
 I looked at the mobile until it became a frozen fountain.

Then we asked them to close their eyes and to imagine a snake:

I see a snake on a tightrope.
 I see a snake chasing his tail.
 I see a multi-colored polka dot snake doing the twist.
 I see a snake winding up and around a barbershop pole.
 I see a snake on our sun picture and the sun frowns.

VALUES OF POETRY

There is no limit to the ways an imaginative teacher can stimulate children to write strong, exciting poetry. The writing and reading of poetry, if it can be done easily and with pleasure, is the kind of activity that Paul Torrance and others associate with creativity. It values that which is individual, implausible, even grotesque; it encourages the making and seeing of analogies; it makes respectable the discovery and expression of emotions and impulses; it excuses

one for the moment from external constraints—there is authority for skewed grammar, illogical combinations of ideas or images. Yet it encourages restraint and discipline generated from within the writer or the poem. If poetry can be kept alive, children and adults will have at their command a second language through which to see themselves and the world.