

The Peek-a-Boo PRINCIPLE

Making (and Keeping) Connections

By Lisa M. Belisle, M.D., M.P.H., Medical Advisor, Raising Readers

WHEN MY CHILDREN WERE TODDLERS, they loved ‘lift-the-flap’ books. From *Corduroy’s Christmas*, to the *Berenstain Bears’ Home Sweet Tree*—they couldn’t get enough. After many times reading the same book, I would hear my husband sigh softly as little Campbell, Abby or Sophie crawled into his lap yet again with one of these charmers. Clearly they were getting more out of the experience than he, yet he doggedly continued with the task at hand. Child development experts would applaud his patience. They would remind him that he was helping his kids engage in repetitive tasks with just the right balance of known outcomes and surprise. He was championing the **Peek-a-Boo Principle**.

Most of us are familiar with the game of ‘peek-a-boo.’ For the uninitiated, here’s the technique: catch the baby’s interest, cover your eyes with your hands, then open your fingers and cry “peek-a-boo.” A blanket or other head covering may be substituted for your hands. This is best done at first with a happy face, though in older children, one may consider exploring the impact of the sad or crazy visage. Many children will follow this game for quite a while, indicating attentiveness with smiles or other changes in expression. While this has traditionally been recognized as an important developmental milestone beginning at 7-9 months, the latest research indicates that babies as young as 4 months can actually engage in this activity.

Why is peek-a-boo so important? It is a repetitive, predictable pastime with an occasionally unforeseen (from the child’s standpoint) outcome. Children at 4 months are using this game to create new neural pathways. The more they use the synapses in these pathways, the stronger these connections become. When multiple connections fire at the same time, they become wired together, forming networks. As children age, their brains start ‘pruning’ some of these networks. If they haven’t been used often enough (or at all), the synaptic connections get eliminated, i.e. the “use it or lose it” phenomenon.

Peek-a-boo is a particularly intriguing way for babies to use their brains because it involves the facial contortions of fellow human beings. Remember the peek-a-boo-playing four-month-old? He already recognizes certain emotions. He has also started to engage in empathy. Use a ‘negative’ face with a baby, and he is likely to respond in kind. Infants

are all about body language—especially when displayed by someone they love.

While infants explore empathy, older children glean more advanced peek-a-boo benefits. Six-month-olds will often join in the game, moving their hands around and exercising gross motor control. They begin to build on their burgeoning sense of humor, chortling appreciatively at the odd countenances of their favorite adults. They also start to enjoy the literary version of peek-a-boo: lift-the-flap books.

Lift-the-flap books are a veritable developmental triathlon for tots. Children must listen to the sounds the adult makes (to know when to lift the flap), focus visually on the correct flap and use fine motor control to move the flap off of the page. Peek-a-boo and lift-the-flap books also underscore the idea of object permanence. In recent studies, children as young as 10 weeks old have demonstrated that they realize life is not as simple as “out of sight, out of mind.” They likely know when a parent lurks behind a pair of hands, just as older kids recognize that a picture is still present even when flap-obscured.

As seen in my children’s seasonally irrelevant devotion to *Corduroy’s Christmas*, most kids have a fondness for flap books. This preference is related to the key literacy skill **print motivation**. When kids like a specific book, they want it read repeatedly. If this fondness for books is nurtured, it will eventually inspire the desire to read independently. (For a sampling of potentially prized flap books, see **Lift-the-Flap Favorites**.)

The next time a parent groans when confronted with a beloved lift-the-flap book, remind him of the Peek-a-Boo Principle. From fostering empathy in four-month-olds to promoting print motivation in the older set, there’s nothing like a well-loved repetitive activity to keep neural network pruning at bay. I’m sure that parent

will thank you for your insights. Now I’ll just have to convince my husband, because at age 5, sweet Sophie still loves *Home Sweet Tree* ...



“Peek-a-boo and lift-the-flap books also underscore the idea of object permanence. In recent studies, children as young as 10 weeks old have demonstrated that they realize life is not as simple as “out of sight, out of mind.”

RESOURCES:

- Families and Work Institute, “Rethinking the Brain Presentation Kit,” 1998.
- Gallager, Kathleen, “Brain Research and Early Development,” *Young Children*, July 2005, p. 12.
- Wingert, Pat and Brant, Margaret, “Reading Your Baby’s Mind,” *Newsweek*, August 15, 2005, p. 33.
- www.childdevelopmentinfo.com
- www.raisingreaders.org

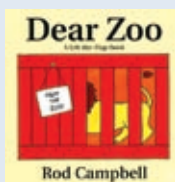


Raising Readers

A Family Health and Literacy Program
for Maine Children Ages Birth to 5 years

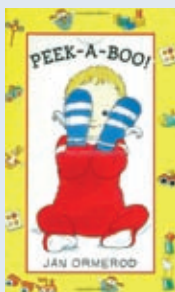
Lift-the-Flap Favorites

Discover more “lift-the-flap” favorites by using the searchable book database feature at www.raisingreaders.org



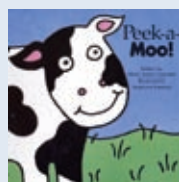
Dear Zoo

by Rod Campbell
Little Simon, 1986
ISBN 0689825498



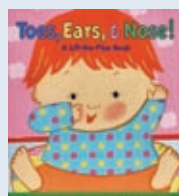
Peekaboo!

by Jan Ormerod
Dutton Juvenile, 1998
ISBN 0525459367



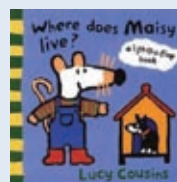
Peek-a-Moo

by Marie Torres Cimarusti
Illustrated by Stephanie Petersen
Dutton Juvenile, 1998
ISBN 0525460837



Toes, Ears & Nose!

by Marion Dane Bauer
Illustrated by Karen Katz
Little Simon, 2003
ISBN 0689847122



Where Does Maisy Live?

by Lucy Cousins
Candlewick, 1999
ISBN 0763611638



Where is Maisy's Panda?

by Lucy Cousins
Candlewick, 1999
ISBN 0763607533



Where's Spot?

by Eric Hill
Putnam, 2003
ISBN 0399234950



Who Said Moo?

by Harriet Ziefert
Illustrated by Simms Taback
Blue Apple, 2002
ISBN 1929766475