

Poetry Day Thoughts and Standards

by Deirdre M. Folley (with editorial thoughts by Leila M. Lawler). Copyright [Like Mother. Like Daughter](#)

Let's memorize poetry together!

Leila: ([In this post](#), I link to a wonderful essay by Jean Kerr on her experience with a family "culture hour," which was notable in that she did not homeschool and she had five boys — so no excuses!) (Full disclosure, I was terrible at having my children recite things, but my children do very well having my grandchildren recite!)

When Deirdre sends out her email prior to Poetry Day, she says, “Anyone who’d like to recite is welcome to a turn. We love to hear from anyone, from wee beginner to advanced big kid or mom!”

If you had this group say, on a Sunday after church, you could include dads as well. My husband has a few poems he pulls out to the delight of our children and now grandchildren.

Deirdre's Thoughts and Standards for Poetry Day

Why Memorize and Recite Poetry?

- To increase cultural literacy (if your child does not know his poetry, from nursery rhymes to Shakespeare, there is no telling how many references he will miss over his lifetime!).
- To expand knowledge of and appreciation for language usage.
- To develop a sense of rhythm, meter, timing, cadence – the musicality of language.
- To encounter the vast trove of knowledge and wisdom found in poetry.
- To increase poise and confidence; preparation for future public speaking and acting.
- For enjoyment and delight!

Steps for teaching poetry and having kids recite successfully

1. Read the poem aloud to your child with strong expression. We latch on to visual cues, so beautifully illustrated poetry books are the best way to begin!
2. Read the poem aloud again the next day and discuss. This does not need to be tedious or deeply scholarly; simply exchange some ideas about the poem, explain any unknown words, maybe share a favorite line, etc. We memorize better what we fully understand.

3. On the third day, read aloud again. Then have the child recite with you as you repeat it a fourth time. They pick up very fast and will already be well on their way to knowing it by now!

4. Daily: the child stands up and faces you to try the poem on his own. Include hand gestures (especially with little ones) to engage the body, making the poem more fun and much more memorable. Target trouble areas and have him repeat. If you can't hear him or can't understand him, have him slow down and try again with more clarity. Be slow to prompt. Let him reach for the words with his memory so that he owns them.

5. You may want to re-enforce the poem by occasionally re-reading it (or reciting it, if you've memorized it). Vary your expressions so that the child gets different ideas about how to approach reciting. Affirm expressive recitation with big smiles, strong reactions, and applause.

6. "Dress Rehearsal" — Have the child practice the poem in front of someone who has not heard it before (Dad, other family members, friends), with the expectation that there will be no prompting. If he's really struggling, you can prompt — but make sure you give him a long chance before stepping in!

7. If Dress Rehearsal didn't go well, go back to earlier steps and refresh. If it went well, he is ready for a formal recitation!

Further tips for challenging poems (for older/more advanced students):

– We have to have a piece memorized 'pat' before we can fully imbue it with expression. At the same time, dramatic expression helps make a poem memorable. Practice by going back and forth between 'rattling it off' and expressive recitation.

– Practice the poem again before bed and then first thing in the morning. This increases memorization because of how our brains form pathways while we sleep.

– Practice in a foreign accent sometimes.

– Walking in circles, pacing, marching, dancing while reciting will all help seal the words in our minds.

– Do have siblings learn together in a group! Yes, the toddler can absolutely be listening along and learning the harder poems (while the older siblings revisit the easy ones). While each child only has to master one, all of them learn all the poems (at least a bit) — a great way to maximize learning! That being said, when big siblings are working on long and/or challenging poems, let them do much of the work on their own so as not to tax the littles.

Poetry Day Standards

– Please emphasize to your children at home that we do not talk while others are reciting.* Moms will do our best to keep noisy babies aside so as not to disrupt the recitations.

– The reciter should announce the poem title and poet if applicable.

- In the interest of keeping the session moving and not wearing out the little listeners, reciters should begin promptly once they take the floor.
- Each child has a chance to recite what he/she has learned. If too nervous on the first attempt, he/she should sit down and may try again after a spell. After a second attempt, if he/she's not up for it, then we'll try again next month!
- Please establish expectations for behavior with your child before the moment to get up and try arrives.
- The more exciting and expressive the recitation, the better the audience will listen!

Leila: A suggestion for decorum: Have a little ritual during practice at home and certainly at Poetry Day of taking a moment to arrange listeners sitting quietly on the floor. Prepare them briefly by saying, "Now we will listen to the poems, sitting quietly, hands folded!" Where there are a lot of children, taking time to get them situated that way (or on laps etc) goes a long way to avoiding the dreaded loud whispers and admonishments as the main event is occurring. Scootch an unruly child right out or have him sit right next to you. Soon they will get the idea... It's all a matter of habit!

I heartily second Deirdre's tip about not dwelling on a young child's shyness and so on. Give them a little try and then move on. One of her boys was paralyzed with fear at age 4 and now at age 8 is as expressive and enthusiastic as it is possible to be!

Our Poetry Book Recommendations (these are Amazon affiliate links, but all could be purchased second hand of course) :

[A Child's Garden of Verses](#), edited by Robert Louis Stevenson, illustrations by Tasha Tudor

[A Child's Calendar](#) by John Updike, illustrations by Trina Schart Hyman

[The Golden Treasury of Poetry](#) edited by Louis Untermeyer, illustrations by Joan Walsh Anglund

[A Child's Book of Poems](#) edited and illustrated by Gyo Fujikawa

[Now We Are Six](#) by A.A. Milne, illustrations by E. H. Shepard

[The Oxford Book of Children's Verse](#) edited by Iona Opie and Peter Opie

The Bad Child's Book of Beasts by Hillaire Belloc

Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book

Mother Goose rhymes are perfect for the littles: [here's my post](#) with some recommendations.

