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2017
Roots Resources
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/26646
Birdsey, B., & Storbeck, C. (2017). Different is beautiful. Johannesburg: Roots Resources. Number 1 in the series Benjamin's girl

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Bianca Birdsey & Claudine Storbeck

Illustrations by Elizabeth Goode



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First published in 2017 by Roots Resources
Printed by ABC Press
ISBN 978-0-9921857-2-5

Text © Bianca Birdsey & Claudine Storbeck
Illustrations © Elizabeth Goode



Benjamin's Girl is an autobiographical storybook series based on the events and experiences of the Birdsey family who have three deaf children and a very dear Benjamin bear!

Introduction to Literacy



Welcome to the first in our series of books about a charming little bear called Benjamin, and Esther, his special girl! We have created this book series because we love deaf and hard of hearing children, and because it is our dream for every one of our children to fall in love with books and become readers.

Literacy is everywhere and whatever your role... whether you are a language teacher, a parent, or friend, every one of us has a special child in our lives that needs us to introduce them to the wonder of books. In order to do this it doesn't matter who we are or where we come from, it doesn't even matter if we didn't have a good start in life as readers ourselves. What does matter is that we can all learn to become reading partners and models for our children.

So, how do children actually learn to read?

There have been thousands of books written on how children learn to read, and yet most researchers and teachers will agree that the pathway to reading is still mostly a mystery. There are various models and methods of teaching reading, from phonics to whole word and vocabulary learning, yet there is no 'one way' that is the answer. Children don't learn to read as much as they become readers... doesn't that just give you huge a sense of relief ... phew, we don't need to teach our kids to read as much as we just need to provide them with these wonderful literacy experiences, and this is what we will begin to explore in this prologue.

When should we start reading with our children?

Literacy and the journey to becoming a reader starts at birth, with each little thing we do forming the stepping-stones on which the rest of this path toward literacy is built. IT'S NEVER TOO EARLY TO BEGIN TO READ to your child nor is it ever too late! Just get started, because it's so much easier than you think.

Every child learns differently, learns at a different pace and at a different age, yet the one thing that all good readers have in common is early exposure to books and rich and meaningful literacy experiences. It is in these 'literacy-rich environments' that literacy unfolds for our children and it is therefore our role to create and nurture these 'rich environments'.

What is a literacy rich environment & what on earth is a literacy experience?

No matter what your class looks like or the type of home you live in, a literacy rich environment is one where children see print- whether they are books (shop-bought or homemade, whether they are shiny and new or old and tatty), magazines, newspapers, adverts from a local supermarket or even a birthday card. Your child needs to see you enjoying books and reading various things that seem fun... perhaps a silly message from a friend, an article in the newspaper or a delicious recipe. Invite and encourage your child to come and sit with you as you read, look at the post, or write a shopping list. Let me share a secret with you... one of the keys to success in your child becoming a readers is YOU! Children want to spend their time with you, communicate with you and have fun with you, it's less about what you do than about how you do it.

Here's another secret: it's not always about having a book in your hand, its also about rich communication and for that you don't need money or resources, you don't need technology or a range of expensive toys or books… it just means you having interesting conversations with your child, whether you speak, sign or cue or whether you do a combination of what works for your unique child. Just being present, building a relationship with your child, talking about what happened over the weekend, how they are feeling, discussing what is happening around them and what they are interested in.

One of the best kept secrets, that seems almost too obvious, is that the more we do things, the better we do things, and so in other words, the more your child reads, the better she will read. However, if reading is a challenge it's the last thing your child will want to do, and so the opposite is also true, the less your child reads the less chance she will have of ever becoming good at it. So, if we make it as fun as possible and as wonderful and interesting as possible, our children will have happy experiences with books and so the positive cycle begins!

How do I get started and what should I actially do?

One of the best ways to start exposing your children to stories is by opening a book at a really interesting page and just spending time looking at the picture and talking about it, exploring what you see and think is happening, but more importantly, it's about following your child and noticing what she is looking at, what she is curious about and what seems to be capturing her attention.

We, as teachers and parents, need to be masterful observers of our kids. Our skills as observers really need to become our 'secret weapon', the thing that should amaze our kids and make them think, "How did she know I was wondering about that?"

Exploring pictures together can be a lot of fun, but more than that it can also be a huge opportunity to have interesting conversations, and this is what we call "book sharing". This is a wonderful way to start introducing books to little ones, from as early as possible. For tiny ones this could mean maybe only a minute or two while you lie on the carpet together and you have her attention naturally. This time will extend as children grow older and as they fall in love more and more with books, so use every little opportunity to "grab their attention". It is also wonderful if you can get your child actively involved in the process: ask questions (I wonder why she is laughing?), point with big eyes/show surprise (What do you think that is?) or even ask her to 'read it' to you. Don't be shy, use your face, your voice, your eyes and hands… its all about having fun together. "Telling the story" is another fun way to share the book with your child, a bedtime story, letting them tell you the story, discussing possible different endings to the story or even 'acting out' the story, e.g. "Let's pretend we are the kittens trying to catch the mouse... ooooh, here comes a puppy, let's hide in the tree. I'm feeling scared". The strength of these few techniques lies in the fact that anyone can tell stories and do pretend play and drama with their children, and that these are techniques used in early childhood learning experiences, because they are age appropriate, language extending and imagination enhancing.

Let's start this exciting journey into the world of Benjamin and his girl... ENJOY!





For Hadassah, Tahlita & Eden,
may you always know that you are fearfully
and wonderfully made. Girls, let those little
lights of yours shine!

My name is Benjamin, and this is my girl. I think her name is Esther. I've seen it stamped on the brown paper school book covers. Mom calls her in a special way. She uses her hands and my girl understands exactly what she is saying.



My girl and I have so much fun! We met when we were both new. She has now had six birthday parties. We have only spent one night apart, and that was by mistake.



My girl is much bigger than me, she's almost the size of mom's rose tree. Her bouncy hair is the colour of honey biscuits. Her eyes are like the sky, and cheeks like pink marshmallows.



We play 'moms and babies' together and ride around on her zooty bike.





Every day, when she comes home from school, she fetches me from our bedroom, and gives me a long cuddle, whilst her twisted curls tickle my cheeks. She smell like pajamas.



My girl is very smart. Our bedroom is filled with paper rectangles that have gold stars on them. She brings them home from school. I wonder what each one is for?



She and her mom go out a lot, but mom says I need to stay at home. I would be heartbroken if I lost my girl out there. Sometimes I can guess where they have been.





On Thursdays, she's all in pink, with her bouncy hair neatly tied high up on her head. Sometimes, she's just in normal clothes, and I wonder where she has been.

On Tuesdays she comes home wet and tired.



Only on special days mom lets me come too. My girl needs me close when she's feeling worried, and wants to show me the fun things when she's feeling very excited. Now and then she snuggles me in her backpack on just an ordinary day.



We love to play outside together, jumping on the trampoline and swinging high into the leafy sky. She holds me tight, and I feel safe.







My girl has these special jewels that she wears in her ears. I wish I had some too. They are green and orange and have squidgy parts that snuggle deep into her ears. Without them, her world is quiet. She listens with her eyes and nose, and talks with her hands. Mom, Dad and I understand what her dancing fingers are saying.

She also has super powers. She notices things that other people don't see. Mom says that she has 'eagle eyes'. I don't think I want to meet an eagle.

She also notices when people are feeling sad, even before they know it themselves. With her gentle hands and kind eyes, she makes everyone feel special.

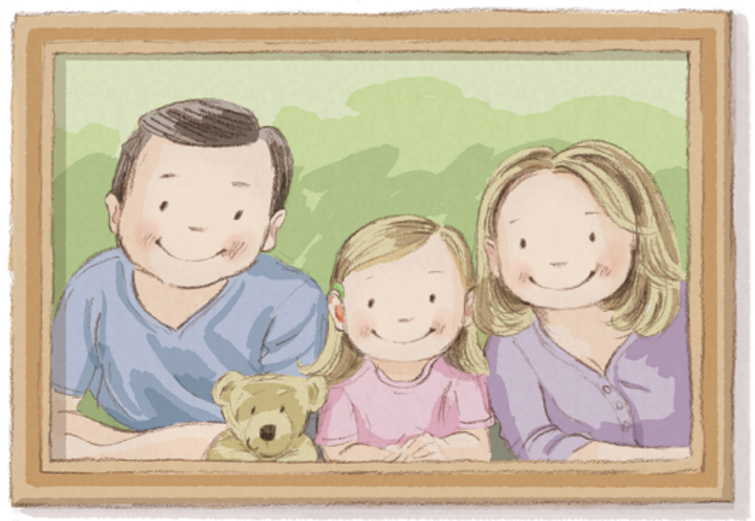




I love my girl more than she loves birthday cake and butterflies. I love her more than Christmas morning. I think she loves me that much too.



She's different to other boys and girls, and that's what makes her extra special. Not everyone understands her, but I do. I'm so happy that she is mine. Mom and Dad are too







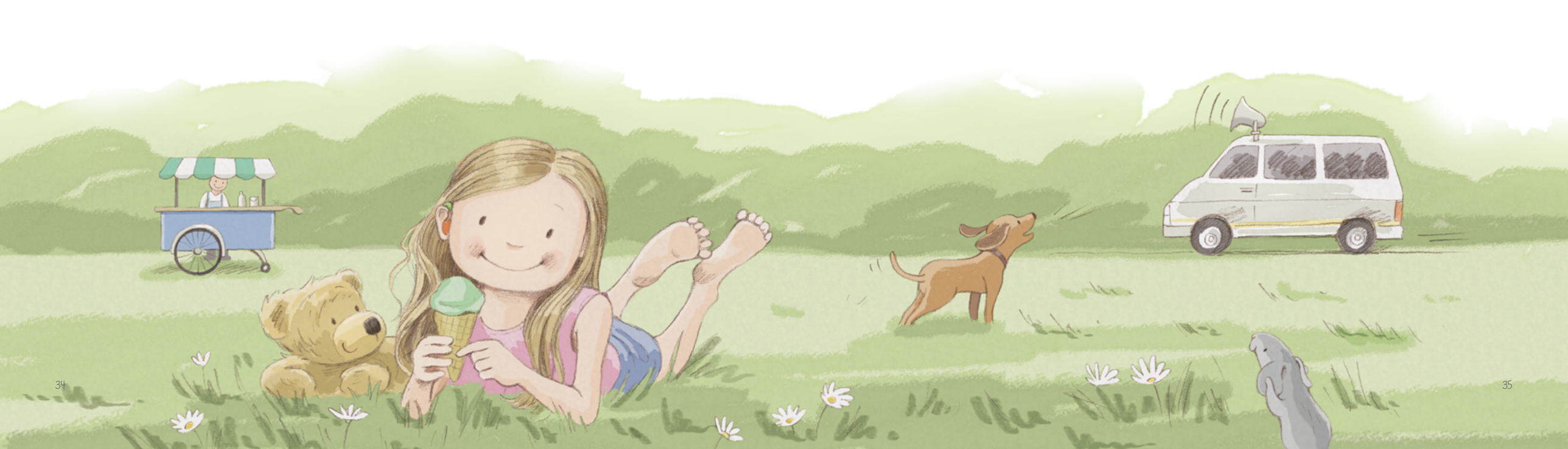


Sometimes other children don't understand my girl. Sometimes they say silly things just because they don't understand. Most of the time they are not trying to be mean. Mom will sometimes explain that my girl is deaf. She's all of the things that every other little girl is, just... well, deaf.



Mom says that deaf means that you can't hear. But from what I can see, deaf means a whole lot more about what you can do, and less of what you can't do. Deaf means listening with your skin, understanding with your eyes and sprinkling experiences with your sense of smell.

Deaf means noticing things that no-one else sees; it means noticing when people are feeling blue. Deaf means closing your eyes to wandering thoughts and heart whispers; uninterrupted by barking dogs or noisy car alarms. Deaf means truly listening to what others may be thinking or feeling.



My girl loves it when rainbow light spills through the window. Mom says that being different is just like that; it's the differences in the colours that make these rays of magic so very special. Imagine if rainbows were all green or all orange? That would be boring!



My extraordinary girl is the apple of my eye, she's different and everthing about her is beautiful.



Benjamin's Girl -The Story

Exploring fun facts in literacy...

As we end this story l wonder if you noticed our choice of interesting words and phrases, and that every picture has something interesting to spark a conversation with your child, no matter her age.

We tried to never use simple words to describe more interesting things, for example, when Esther was feeling worried, we didn't just say she felt sad, and when she felt excited we didn't just say she was happy. This is a really important lesson for us all to learn. Lets look at this example: if we are feeling devastated, lost or even depressed and don't have the actual vocabulary to explain how we feel, we may then just use the word sad, which hardly captures the complexities of these very deep and intense feelings. What if our child cannot explain to us she is being teased and bullied or that she got the prize for the 3rd time in the maths class. Limited vocabulary leads to limited language, and this leads to limited expressions and the ability to manage situations in your life. Language is power and it is within our hands to make it available to each and every one of our children, whether they are hearing, deaf or hard-of-hearing.

Think back to how you learned about the value of money, daily news like natural disasters or about arguments and negotiations.

One of the key challenges for children growing up with a hearing loss is the lack of or limited access to incidental learning, which means that they don't just overhear everyday conversations around them. The value of incidental learning is totally underestimated and one of the reasons deaf children often have such a limited general knowledge. This leads to a huge gap in the foundations of their language and therefore their learning, and so we, as teachers and parents, need to fill in the gaps and pro-actively prevent them from appearing.

One of the most powerful tools we can use to ensure these gaps don't form is by 'narrating the day', which means that we talk about what we do, think and feel.

Let's try it, for example, sharing the interesting story you heard on the news about the whales, or about the fact that you left your lunch at home and that you felt so frustrated and very hungry at work today. Another example would be to 'think out loud' as you plan an activity like painting the bookshelf, talking through what you need to have and do, for example, "Hmm I think we need to go and fetch the paint and newspaper... (walks out and comes back in)... Oooh these tins of paint are huge, phew they are very heavy. My hands are aching. Okay, now lets spread out the newspaper all along the floor- can you help me please?" When you consciously do this, your child will have access to so much more, including new vocabulary, planning and sequencing, new ways of phrasing things and general new learning, like the fact that putting newspaper down before we paint will help prevent the paint getting onto the floor.

With every story in our "Benjamin's girl" series there are so many wonderful opportunities to help your child learn new things, extend their vocabulary and language, and of course imagine, wonder and HAVE FUN. We will discuss different ideas and give you practical examples after each story relating to 4 specific areas: Theory of mind, Being Deaf, Language development opportunities, and Maximising each moment.

1. Theory of mind

One of the building blocks of reading is the development of what researchers call "Theory of Mind", which basically means being able to step out of one's own thinking and putting one's self in someone else's shoes, or thinking beyond the here and now. So this means to understand that other people feel and think differently than I do, have different perspectives, intentions or different likes and dislikes than I do. Having Theory of Mind helps a child understand that we are all different, and that it's okay. In order to develop this higher level of thinking a child needs language, because it is through language that we learn to name our emotions, discuss what happened yesterday, plan for a party in the future or imagine what it would feel like to be a an animal like a lamb or a lion. This then becomes pretend play: roaring like a huge angry lion or scampering like a tiny little lamb.

Have you noticed that we aren't just using the word 'scared' in this example as we want to stretch & grow our children's vocabulary.

There are many examples in the story that you can use to elicit Theory of Mind type of thinking and help the child start 'stepping into other shoes'. For example, when Benjamin says he doesn't want to meet an eagle you can ask, "I Wonder why Ben doesn't want to meet an eagle?" or "How do you think Benjamin is feeling?" Here is an opportunity to build emotional vocabulary and to discuss this further with your child by asking, "Do you think he might be scared of the eagle? I wonder if he is feeling frightened?". Now you can link this conversation to the child personally... "What makes you feel scared?" Apart from the literacy and Theory of Mind opportunities here, there are also significant benefits here as you learn more about these unique little people you live or work with. You may even want to share what makes you scared, worried, or anxious... remembering to use interesting and varied vocabulary.

2. Being Deaf

This book is of course totally unique, as its character (the human one) is Deaf and this is a wonderful opportunity for you as the teacher or parent to discuss the wonder of "being Deaf" and the beautiful things we can learn about it. This new understanding of hearing loss leads to acceptance, and in this story, "Different is Beautiful", acceptance is on three levels. Firstly, we see that Esther accepts herself; secondly, there is wonderful acceptance by those who are close to her, i.e. her parents and little Benjamin, and then thirdly, there is evidence of acceptance and understanding from others in her ballet class. All three levels of acceptance are important in developing strong socio-emotional wellbeing and a healthy sense of belonging and mental health.

It is not often that your Deaf child will ever see or read a book with a character 'just like them' in the story, a child with hearing aids, who communicates in Sign Language and experiences the world with all her other senses. Seeing Esther, who is brave, kind and lives an interesting life, explores these 'strengths' and there is a clear sense of how her deafness makes her special... a sense of 'Deaf Gain'.

As a teacher, or a parent or maybe a family member like a sibling or grandparent of a Deaf child, you may find yourself being the one who is more impacted by this particular point than your child. This may trigger in you some thoughts and feelings you had not felt in a long time, for example, that she's actually going to be more than OK... and that she will be able to do things that other hearing kids can do... AND YOU WILL BE RIGHT!

3. Language Development

In our third point we want to emphasise that "Language Development is the Key" to literacy development, because it is the foundation of communication, thought, creativity and relationships among many other things.

Considering that over 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents, and the fact that this young child will be the first deaf or hard-of-hearing person they will have met, it is understandable that it can be very overwhelming. This, along with all the extra things like hearing tests, amplification, speech therapy and looking for a school that can meet these unique needs, a teacher or a parent could feel so relieved when their child starts developing language, that it could then even lead to complacency. We can become so relieved that they are developing language and learning to read, that it almost feels that this in itself is enough… but let's not just accept 'good enough', as our deaf children are capable of so much more than we can imagine.

Look for opportunities in the story to engage the young deaf reader in further discussion. For example, where Esther is lying on the grass with Benjamin, enjoying a green ice-cream. Rather than just being satisfied with "she's eating a green ice-cream", let's stretch ourselves… let's see if we can really use this as a Language Development Opportunity.

At this point it's important to discuss how the colour and the flavour of the ice-cream are two different things.

After waiting for your child to notice the ice-cream (following your child's lead), you can now ask... "What flavour could she be enjoying? Mint? Kiwi? Apple? Creme-soda? What's your favourite flavour of ice-cream?"

"Oh, you like a pink ice cream! Pink is a beautiful colour, but what is the flavour that you enjoy most? Could the pink ice-cream be a strawberry flavour? What other flavours could have a pink colour?" This is now also an opportunity to get a little ridiculous and play... have fun... "Hmmm, I wonder what other flavours a green ice-cream could be... cucumber? Spinach... ooh, yuck... I think I would prefer a fruity tasting ice-cream and not one that tastes like vegetables". Once we start thinking of fun ideas to talk about, the sky is the limit as we extend language and laugh together.

Another type of fun with language is the use of idioms and metaphors, and yet often it is this creative and more abstract use of language that we avoid with our deaf and hard-of-hearing children, because perhaps we have heard that 'deaf kids just can't use that type of language'. Other reasons could be that many of the books and stories for deaf children just don't make use of interesting language, and so they don't get exposed to idioms and metaphors, or because they don't hear these lovely examples incidentally. For these reasons, abstract language can often be a challenge, so let us always aim to expose our children to interesting, challenging and even surprising vocabulary and language.

Remember to wait a few seconds once you've asked a question, so the child has a chance to think and possibly even answer.

Let's look at the example of the actual idiom in our story, when Benjamin describes Esther as being the "apple of his eye". If we were reading to a deaf child, the temptation could simply be to explain that he loves her very much, which is true, as it is the explanation of the idiom, but then they would miss the beauty of the actual play with language... and the opportunity at higher level thinking.

Take time to discuss this. It may be nice for them to know that the term was first used in the Bible and then in an Old English book written by King Aelfred of England (in the year AD 885). It referred to the pupil of the eye and meant that the person was very special, cherished above all others. Now, it would be wonderful if you could then try and use the idiom in every day discussions so your child can see other examples of its use. If we truly take this challenge on, then we too will be learning more about our own language.

4. Maximise each moment

Finally, each story you tell or read to your child is so much more than just a story. It is packed with opportunities to explore and laugh together, imagine together or even play a game together. Some examples could be to go and find different green ice-creams and taste them all (describing the flavours, smells or textures), or and to twirl and dance together like ballerinas. Our aim with this book series is to fill the stories with different themes, ideas and opportunities way beyond what you initially see. Our illustrations can provide opportunities for story development or even totally unrelated discussions about the little mouse, for example, and where he could be hiding on each page, why he has an umbrella or what he could be doing when he isn't on a particular page. Either way, it is about your child having fun with books… falling in love with books and ultimately becoming a reader!

As we get to the end of this first "Benjamin's Girl" book, Different is Beautiful, we thought it may be a good idea to say that there are actually *no rules when you and your child are having fun with books*... read them, discuss them, look at them, laugh at them and if you're 6-months old, lick and taste them. Every little thing we do as we touch,

feel,
experience
and learn to imagine,
is a step closer to the wonderful world of literacy.