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Children's Magazines

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The word "magazine" finds its origins in Arabia, and while it means "a storehouse of information" to us, to them it was simply a storehouse and usually one of ammunition. (Hence an automatic weapon's magazine for holding cartridges.) The word takes on some of its original meaning when we view magazines as a storehouse of ammunition to get kids to discover reading. Magazines are uniquely suited to attract children to the written word. They are a powerful ally of teachers and librarians struggling in the battle to get kids to read.

Perhaps a magazine's most powerful attraction lies in the fact that it is, more than any book, made up of parts. These parts can be read or ignored. Adults as well as children know that it's "ok" when reading magazines to skip uninteresting parts and still say we have read the magazine. Anyone who has spent time in a doctor's waiting room knows this to be true. Few people sit and consume an entire issue of Time word by word. We pick and choose what looks good--ignoring the uninteresting altogether. When we cease to be interested in the article we can put it down or leaf through for something else, sometimes reading only captions on the pictures. (Fess up you National Geographic "readers".) A reader is never faced with a hundred pages to be finished. A typical Cricket story runs three to four pages, enough to entertain but not intimidate.

Magazine articles are by necessity short and to the point. A recent Cobblestone article told the history of slavery very well in three pages. This allows the reader many successful experiences of completion. The facts are capsulized so that in one page we can understand a subject. The quick delivery of information is also very empowering. Kids can effortlessly dazzle their parents with a "factoid" from 3.2.1 Contact such as "Instead of wearing a watch, George Washington carried around a small sundial" or "Honeybees travel about 55,000 miles to make one pound of honey." Knowledge makes us more interesting and magazines attractively package that knowledge.

A second strength of magazines is their variety. From up-to-the-minute computer news to a look at America's lighthouses, there is something for every interest. World magazine even takes a shot at just being "generally interesting" with articles in a single issue ranging from helping turtles to King Tut. Odyssey looks at how the space shuttle "rides" a 747 while Penny Power tries to find out just how "natural" granola bars really are. If there is not a children's magazine on a particular subject there is likely one written for a general adult audience. From Wooden Boat Monthly to American Heritage, there is entertainment and knowledge available just for the asking.

Packaging is another factor working in favor of getting kids interested. When a book is created it is often more substantial and can hold up long enough to find a readership. Magazines, on the other hand, normally have a month to attract readers. Thus, editors put all they can into the packaging: it must be colorful, graphic, flashy, bold. Zoo Books uses full-page, close-up shots of the animals it features each month. Colorful graphics present information in an appealing, uncluttered fashion.

While it often takes a year for a finished manuscript to become a book, a magazine may be created in a matter of weeks. To attract readers, a magazine must be current, even trendy. Up-to-the-minute information can be a valuable tool in attracting readers. As we turn our attention to Halley's Comet, Odyssey magazine has an issue with color photographs, charts showing the best times to view it, along with experiments and a history. By being right on top of current information, a magazine can attract readers the regular stacks cannot. A magazine must sell itself to a variety of reading and interest levels--fresh, alive, and monthly.

While magazines do much to sell themselves, there are several things a teacher or librarian can do to get them in the hands of kids. Perhaps the greatest effect is had when the teacher is seen conspicuously interested in and reading magazines. The things we actually take time to engage in, as opposed to those we intend to engage in, send the most powerful message. Whether a children's
magazine or the latest issue of *Newsweek*, let the kids see you read. Talk about what you read and find interesting, show them that magazines are an important source of enjoyment for you. Choosing reading as an important priority personally will affect your students more than anything else.

Because of their up-to-date information and colorful designs, magazines are an excellent source of curriculum material. Use magazines in lessons, pointing out interesting items and leaving them available for further personal reading. When you have a spare minute, read aloud a poem out of *Cricket* or half a story. You might be surprised how an unfinished story can spark interest. Discuss with the class or individuals interesting things you found or enjoyed and then leave the magazine out. Once a child has discovered pleasure in reading a magazine it is a natural step to reading books.

When evaluating magazines it is best to get an actual copy. Most publishers will send you a copy free if you request it on school letterhead and state it is for evaluation. The best judge of a magazine is you, the teacher.

A good magazine for kids will also be interesting to adults. As you read through, ask yourself some questions like: Does the magazine have a genuine enthusiasm that jumps off the page and is impossible to ignore? Is the magazine created with care, is the layout logical, is the information usable and is it accurate? Are the articles written with care? Historians tend to write with more power on history than sharks; are the writers knowledgeable and complete? What children would enjoy this? Would it tend to be a catalyst to further exploration?

Magazines are good friends to have around as you attempt to get kids to discover reading. In my attempts, each of these titles have proven to be a stalwart at the front:

*Cobblestone*: The History Magazine for Young People, 20 Grove St., Peterborough, NH 03458. $18.50 per year (12 issues).

With a different theme each month from the Civil War to the Grand Canyon, *Cobblestone* features articles, games, timelines and photos to give a well-rounded feel for the subject. A favorite regular feature is "Elsewhere" which tells what else was going on around the world while the featured theme was attracting the nation's attention.

*Cricket*: The Magazine for Children, 1058 8th St., La Salle, IL 61301. $19.80 per year (12 issues).

An eclectic collection of stories, non-fiction, poetry and art on a variety of reading levels. They often use material from books published over the last several years and are a reminder of good books in the stacks.

*Odyssey*: The Young People's Magazine of Astronomy and Outer Space, 625 E. St. Paul Ave., P.O. Box 92788, Milwaukee, WI 53202. $16 per year (12 issues).

No area of space is left uninvestigated. From "What Killed the Dinosaurs?" to "Build Your Own Telescope" every possible subject is presented with color photographs and graphics. The question column is especially good.

*Penny Power*: A Consumer Reports Magazine for Young People, P.O. Box 2878, Boulder, CO 80322. $11.95 per year (6 issues).

Being a good consumer is as far from most kids' minds as good nutrition at Halloween. *Penny Power* seeks to change that notion with engaging, practical applications of good consumerism. A complete investigation of tennis shoes using comparison testing and clear graphics is difficult to pass over. So is the article finding out which is the best bubble gum or
what to do when you have been "ripped off". Solid principles with an emphasis on the real things in kids' lives.

*Ranger Rick*, 8925 Leesburg Pike, Vienna, VA 22184. $12.00 per year (12 issues).

After many years of publication, *Ranger Rick* continues to produce a solid animal magazine. Full color pictures featuring a wide variety of animals and readable short fiction pieces along with special projects and crafts.

*Scienceland*, 501 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10017. $11.95 per year (8 issues).

A bright, colorful magazine for younger children. Each issue features a theme (from rocks to ostriches) with full-page photos and illustrations. The parents' glossary is very helpful.

*National Geographic World*, 17th and M Streets NW, Washington, DC 20036. $9.95 per year (12 issues).

With topics as wide-ranging as its parent, and colorful photographs unmatched anywhere, *World* is packed with intriguing information. With articles looking at everything from skyscrapers to elephants, each issue is sure to arouse some curiosity. Often includes posters and special projects.

*Your Big Back Yard*, 1412 Sixteenth St. NW, Washington, DC 20036. $8.50 per year (12 issues).

Simple but not simplistic articles are accompanied by bold, uncluttered color photographs of a wide variety of animals. Intended for a young audience, it includes stories, games and activities that are simple, but still filled with fascinating information. A recent issue looked at slow-moving animals, whales, habitats, and bears. Each issue comes with a very helpful parents' guide.

*Zoo Books*, P.O. Box 28870, San Diego, CA 92128. $14 per set (10 monthly issues).

While not strictly a periodical (individual issues are available at many zoos) *Zoo Books* still brings spectacular looks at animals each month. Each issue features only one kind of animal. The "Spiders" issue has detailed drawings and close-up pictures (that seem to be alive) of a variety of spiders. Similar treatment of animals from snakes to polar bears in other issues.

3.2.1. *Contact*, P.O. Box 2932, Boulder, CO 80321. $11.95 per year (10 issues).

A highly motivational science magazine because it focuses on the little known or highly practical aspects of science. The November 1985 issue investigates what it is that makes animals care for their young and a feature on viewing Halley's Comet. Regular monthly features include "factoids" (The largest clam ever found weighed 579 1/2 pounds), "Any Questions?" ("Why does your foot fall asleep?"), "Coming Attractions" (an electronic chalkboard is on the way), along with fiction and experiments. "Enter", a review of computers and software, has recently been added.

One essential reference tool that ties all these together is the *Children's Magazine Guide* (7 N. Pinckney St., Madison, WI 53703). The periodical index is well laid out and easy for children to use. The "Announcements" column is the only source of up-to-date information on new magazines, out-of-print magazines and general information on children's magazines.

In addition to these children's magazines, many adult magazines are suitable for children. *Science 85*, *Time*, *Life* and many others have good pictures and interesting articles for children looking for information in more depth.