



Two Children Tell: The Egg and Nicholas

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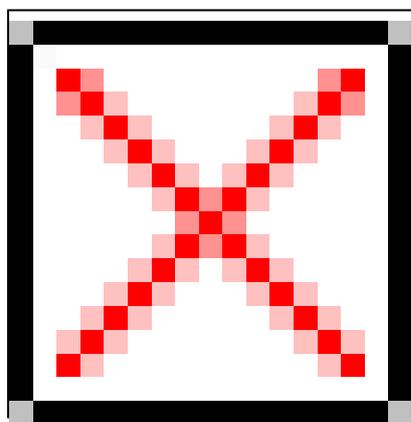
[Virginia Lowe](#) [1]

[204](#) [2]

Byline:

First in a new series by Virginia Lowe on children's early response to stories.

For fifteen years, **Virginia Lowe** kept a record of her two children's responses to literature (in play and conversation as well as in reading sessions) from birth until adolescence. Drawing on her observations, in a new regular series for **Books for Keeps**, she describes children's early response to stories and language. In this the first in the series, Nicholas enjoys **The Egg** by Dick Bruna.



'Its shell burst open. What do you think was inside it?' asks Bruna's **The Egg**, next to a picture of the egg. *Ba!* shouted Nicholas. This was his 'word' for both 'dog' ('bark') and for 'water' ('bath'). I checked with him

V: A dog?

N: *No! Ba!*

V: Water?

N: *'Es!*

He'd seen many an egg broken, mostly on purpose but occasionally dropped, and yes, he knew what was in an egg - water (raw albumen). This was at age two (2y0m).

Bruna's apparently simple tale holds several pitfalls for the toddler. The cat, for instance, is front-on in its first appearance - *beow beow* Nicholas greeted it on his first hearing (1y4m). But the second time it appears, it is seen from the back - a black silhouette, with its tail up. He had recognised this second cat also, and two weeks later he had earnestly put his head sideways down on the page of writing, to try to see under the picture to the cat's face - and similarly on turning over, peered at the writing, hoping the other side of the cat might be there. I guessed what his odd contortions were about because the next day, handed a framed photo of his sister as a baby, he turned it over and over, apparently trying to find the back of the baby's head.

At this stage (1y5m) he had a vocabulary of eighteen spoken words, if one includes the five animal sounds, used for

naming the specific species. He had used his 'word' labelling the dog, the cat, the hen and the cock (a *chook chook* noise, the same as the hen's) but 'duck' or even 'quack' were not in his vocabulary, and anyway the 'little yellow duckling' does not fit the usual gestalt of a duck (sideways, white with a yellow or orange bill ? as Bruna's other ducks do) so it is not surprising that he didn't recognise it on the next page, and said *du?* only after I'd pointed it out and said it was a duck. Three weeks later this had become sufficiently established in his vocabulary for him to pick up the book and ask for it as *du?*, from the duck on the front.

But this was a problem too. We adult readers always began by reading the cover 'The Egg, by Dick Bruna', but at 1y10m, having not heard it for five months, he insisted to the title *No! Duck!* After another six weeks (hearing it once in between) he was able to say, after the cover was read, *Duck. Egg.* It seemed he could accept both as the title now.

So to the question 'What do you think was inside it?' ? Nicholas had heard it at least twelve times when at two he answered with 'water' ? *ba*. Three weeks later (he had heard it twice in between) he answered *ba* again, and then as the page was turned and the duckling appeared, he told himself earnestly *No ba. Duck.*

Two weeks later we read it again ? this time he anticipated the question.

Text: 'Its shell burst open.'

N: *A-duck-a-duck!* (laughing aloud in sheer delight)

Text: 'What do you think was inside it?'

N: *A-duck-a-duck!*

On the next page, at the pictured duckling, he pointed with triumph *A duck!* To the subsequent statements he also proudly gave the answer.

Text: 'It wasn't a cat or a dog.'

N: *Duck!*

Text: 'It wasn't a cock or a hen.'

N: *Duck!*

At two years and two months, he had achieved the really difficult task of saying something different from both the picture and the text. And he had worked it out himself, to his thorough satisfaction.

This was fascinating to watch from the point of view of the development of the theory of mind ? the understanding that people have minds which can hold a 'false belief'. He was suddenly realising this was so of himself. Despite knowing that most eggs have 'water' in them, this one, as the book tells you on the next opening, contained a duckling, and he was able to say this, even before seeing the duckling. It was a triumph of learning, and he had managed it. And he had managed it by himself, too. I had never corrected him, rather allowing the text to do so.

Cognitive psychologists put the understanding of the 'theory of mind' at about four. Only now are they finding ways of testing the child and see the understanding coming in much younger. Nicholas shows it clearly here at two, and I think all parents (as opposed to researchers) could discover similar examples of understanding.

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. She is the proprietor of Create a Kids' Book, a manuscript assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops, interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and produces a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children's literature generally. See www.createakidsbook.com.au [3] for further details. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two children tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978 0 415 39724 7, £29.99 pbk).

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[3]