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'Happy Families' - a classroom perspective

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Liz Waterland on how 'Happy Families' work with children.

For a classroom perspective, we asked **Liz Waterland** for a view on how 'Happy Families' work with children

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Despite the short lines, simple vocabulary, many pictures and clear print, the stories in 'Happy Families' require sophisticated and mature readership skills. It is not just that the humour is often sly to the point of incomprehensibility to many young children (although rewarding to the adults involved!), nor that the language is frequently difficult for a young reader to predict but that the stories require a mature knowledge of relationships and the way they work.

Take one of the latest, **Mrs Vole the Vet**. Mrs Vole is divorced, although this is never said; and she and her children are on the look-out for a new husband for her. A variety of candidates are suggested but there is something wrong with each. Mr Moo, the milkman, for instance, is perfect. 'The only trouble is ... Mrs Moo?'. Small children simply don't understand that it is her existence that is the trouble with Mrs Moo - many of my children are still convinced that one can marry one's daddy and many don't know what marriage is - having no personal knowledge of it.

None of this is to suggest that the 'Happy Families' books are anything other than a delight. Everyone has their favourites although there are some which, I think, creak a bit. Despite this, they remain little gems of entertainment. But do not make the mistake of offering them to children too soon. The children will be puzzled and confused, they may even fail with them, and you will be disappointed. Instead, look on them as treats for able readers, ways for fluent readers to learn to laugh with the peculiarities of character and relations that we are all heirs to, ways for them to use their love of jokes, puns and the absurd to realise what fun reading can be.

Not for beginning readers - but well worth beginning to read

Liz Waterland, a regular **BfK** reviewer, is Head of an infant school in Peterborough.

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