



## Hal's Reading Diary - September 2003

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Hal's Diary and Baby Diary

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**Roger Mills** on Hal at 2 years and 7 month.

Hal is now 2 years and 7 months and his vocabulary is increasingly expanding and becoming more accurate. His father, **Roger Mills**, explains.<!--break-->

A few nights ago Hal picked out **The Story of Babar** for his book before bedtime. I opened it at the inside cover which is decorated with two symmetrical images of elephants (naked unlike the anthropomorphised creature Babar becomes) in a sort of elephantine conga that winds down the page. Hal pointed to one of them and said 'elephant?'. 'Yes, Elephant,' I said. He picked up the slight correction and tried again. 'Elephant?'

Oddly enough there was something a little bit sad for me about this exchange. Sad, because Hal used to have a different word for elephant. He used to call them 'endut' (en as in Enron, dut rhyming with put). Where this coinage came from I have no idea, but for a good year that has been his word, and it is only in the last few months that the correct word has taken the place of the invented one. Other wonderful quirks of Hal's infant lexicon have gone too. 'Dits' his word for biscuit has similarly had to make way. I'm forgetting the old words now, and it took me a good 30 seconds before dits came back. I'm tempted to note them down somewhere before they disappear for ever.

There is no doubt that being read to has played a huge part in Hal's expanding and increasingly accurate vocabulary. I have mentioned before that, from what I can see, Hal does not appear to really engage with the emotional narrative of stories. Babar's tale, for example, has a potentially heartbreaking passage near the beginning when Babar's mother is shot by a cruel hunter. My wife likes to skate quickly over this bit, fearing that it will be too upsetting for Hal. I tend to go a bit slower, but I have never detected a trace of distress in Hal. In fact he only seems to get scared when watching videos, where it seems that the sounds and moving images pack a greater punch for him.

What Hal, who is now two and seven months, seems to like most in books is pointing to things and identifying them. Using words to label things is perhaps *the* greatest pleasure he gets from his books at this stage. Another Babar title, **Babar's ABC**, features a firefighting team in action. 'He's clinging ladder,' Hal will say pointing to the fire-elephant going to the rescue. Simple actions that Hal can identify with 'falling over, climbing a ladder' seem to excite him and he loves to spot them in pictures in books and call them out. Naming objects pictured in books is his other great delight. 'Fox?', 'frog?', 'flute?' and 'fish?' are other images on the F page and Hal knows them all. Quite often these days Hal surprises me by coming up with a word I had no idea he knew.

Identifying and labelling is a huge fun for Hal. He learns by repetition. Sometimes he'll say a new word over and over, playing with its sound, getting familiar with it. With repetition comes accuracy, and it is as if Hal himself is eager to draw a line under the endut era and move on to better and better communication. Perhaps this is inevitable. The inability to express yourself clearly must contribute significantly to the frustrations of the terrible twos. Not only are you having to come to terms with the limits of your power. But even in areas where your parents might be happy to comply with your wishes, you can't get them to because you can't tell them what you want clearly enough. The drive towards words

probably has multiple sources, a love of recognising, identifying and labelling being part of it, with frustration being another powerful incentive. Books aren't the only way to learn words of course. But to those lucky enough to have them as part of their lives they must seem like a fantastic way of getting hold of more of those magical things ? words.

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