



Fast, Slow, High, Low ? vale Peter Spier

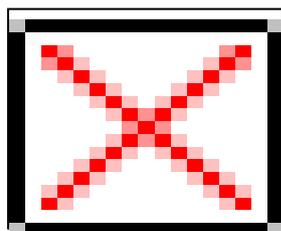
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Two Children Tell: a tribute to **Peter Spier** and relational reasoning



Virginia Lowe pays tribute to **Peter Spier** and examines the impact his books had on her own children.

Which one is different? Show me the biggest. Who is the strongest? This sort of thinking is termed relational reasoning, and many clinical psychologists now see it as the basis of infants' learning language. It has superseded the theories of both Skinner (copying) and Chomsky (genetic). It is beyond the ability of chimps, pigeons, or artificial intelligence. None of these can generalise 'big' when applied to something new, which babies can at about 15 months. Humans can generalise the relational adjectives or situations. The theory is called RFT ? Relational Frame Theory. **NewScientist*** has an article on a baby's first words, spelling it out.

Peter Spier's **Fast Slow High Low: a book of opposites** fits exactly ? and surely should be back in print to celebrate this new theory. It has pages or openings with pictures demonstrating a relational comparison. ?Big/Small?, ?Old/New?, ?Wet/Dry?.

Nicholas was 1y1m (13 months) when I first offered it to him, and Rebecca was 4y4m. I had to think about a few of the pictures ? some are quite challenging, even for an adult. For instance, one of the pictures for ?Fast/Slow? is a pea with the pea plant behind, and an acorn with an oak tree behind. Several times Rebecca said frankly and uncharacteristically ?that's a hard one for me?. I didn't ask her to work them out herself very often, mainly we just talked about them. I don't like quizzing a child, so I confined myself to asking her a couple of the obvious ones, and just one of the puzzle ones. On the ?full/empty? opening, she remarked on the train's first carriage, clearly meant to be empty, and a propos of no comment of mine ?But the train couldn't go if it didn't have a driver! (Implying that the carriage can't be completely empty). Then she ran her finger along the train's carriages, as it is obviously drawn for the child to do, saying ?empty, full, empty, full, full?. John read it a week later and spotted the slipstream behind the carriage on the left, so Rebecca was satisfied that the one that held the driver was not an empty one after all. I thought the full bucket, on the same page was not very clearly drawn, but said nothing.

R: That's full all right! Look it's even run over onto the floor!

On the ?Big/Little? opening she pointed to the closer toy boat and said it was bigger than the tanker, but corrected herself at once and allowed for the perspective. She realised that the stationary digger was ?the quiet? of ?Loud/Quiet?. She was very amused at the ?Same/Different? picture of the ducks. The ?different? one is a toy, the same size and shape as the real poultry.

R: Look Mummy! That duck is pulling the one on wheels! (It has the pulling string round its neck).

At first Nicholas used it mainly to make animal noises (not yet discriminating between ?Moo?, ?Baa? and ?pup-pup?). It's excellent for this age for playing the labelling game. He also picked out ?bubee? and said ?buh? (bus) to all wheeled vehicles.

Rebecca enjoyed pointing out the opposites to him and explaining ?quiet? ?big? ?old? etc. and she accompanied the ?Open/Shut? hands with the ?Open shut them?? song. Nick was amused by the babies with their dummies ?In/Out? ? he still used one at sleep time.

Rebecca enjoyed the ones that had a second element to them. The heaters are hot and cold, but what is the actual weather like? The lights in the house are on when it's dark and off in the daytime (?Light/Dark?)

At 4y10m, Rebecca invented a new way of playing with it. She would announce that the opposition was something quite different to Spier's, then work to explain how all the pictures fitted her definition. She called 'Hot/Cold?' 'Fast, Slow?' and announced that the ice-cream was 'fast?' (eaten or melted, I didn't ask.)

At 2y7m Nick remarked of the 'Long/Short?' spades

N: A man can't dig it.

V: Why not?

N: Cos a boy can dig it. A man can dig that one (like him and John in our veggie garden).

When Nicholas was 3y6m it became one of his favourite books - often pored over alone in bed. He remarked once of 'Over/Under?'

N: That's what I'm going to have when I'm a gold miner.

V: You'll have a pick and a spade?

N: Yes. I'll use the spade if it's soft dirt and the pick if it's hard dirt. (This is not a distinction the book makes).

One of the pictures on the 'Same/Different?' opening is AAAaA. At 3y11m, N picked this correctly and added 'That's a little one of those!'

Both over the years had the most fun from the endpapers, often laughing together. The front endpaper has thirteen pairs of opposites, and the back one has the same pairs but reversed: the fish are in the nest, the birds under the water; the baby holds the barbell up, while the strong man holds up the teddy.

Vale Peter Spier - one of the children's favourite illustrators.

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Australia. She is the proprietor of [Create a Kids' Book](#) [3], 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. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two Children Tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978-0- 4153-9724- 7, £29.99 pbk).

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