

My Family & Other Pests...

- people and families
- contrasts
- personal writing
- haiku

A Lower KS2 Activity by David Harmer



New Baby

My baby brother makes so much noise
that the Rottweiler next door
phoned up to complain.

My baby brother makes so much noise
that all the big green frogs
came out of the drains.

My baby brother makes so much noise
that the rats and mice
wear headphones.

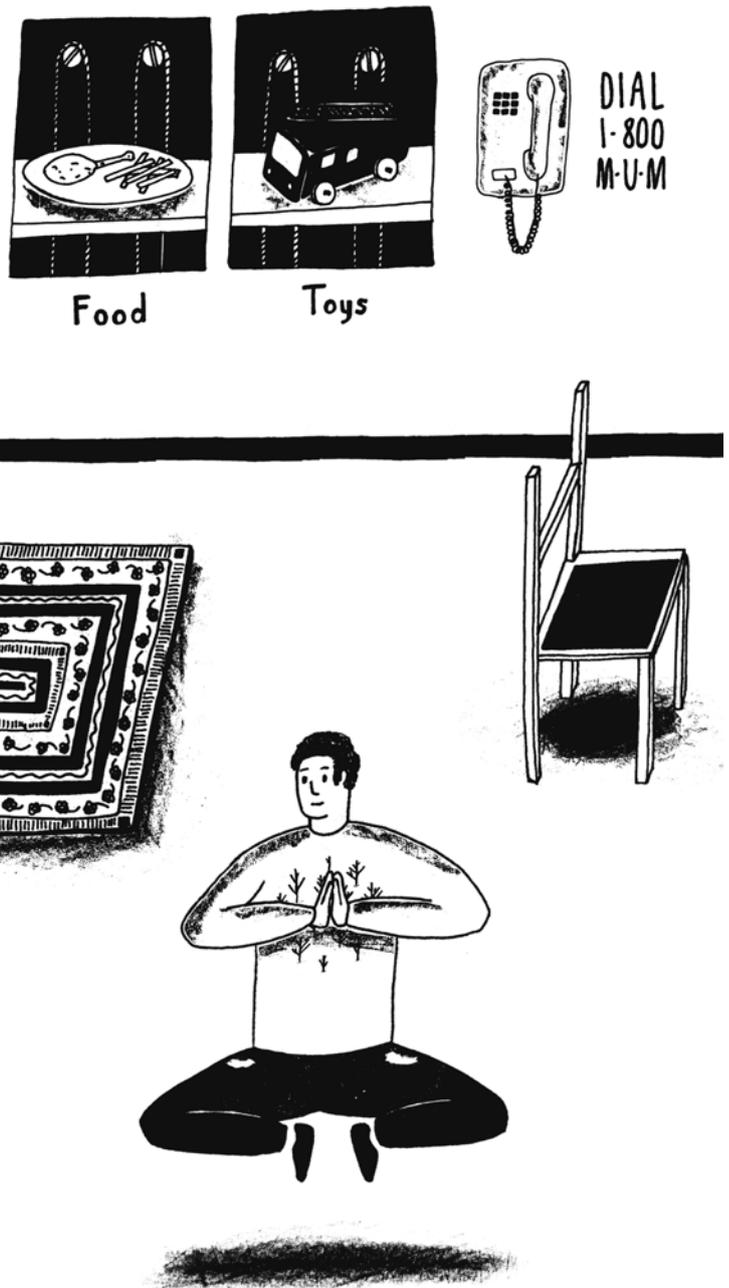
My baby brother makes so much noise
that I can't ask my mum a question,
so much noise that sometimes

I think of sitting the cat on top of him
in his pretty little cot with all his teddies.
But even the cat is terrified of his cries.

So I have devised a plan. A soundproof room.
A telephone to talk to my mum.
A small lift to receive food and toys.

Thing is, it will cost a fortune.
The other thing is, the frogs have gone.
It's not bad now. Not that I like him or anything.

Jackie Kay



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In 'New Baby' Jackie Kay is mining the valuable seam of children's everyday experiences which can lead to a rich variety of poems. Children always have interesting stories to tell about their families and friends. Using these stories and characters for inspiration can be a great way of getting your class writing. The simple structures in these activities can be used for lower Key Stage Two, and reduced or removed for older or more able students.

Write a contrast poem

Taking Jackie Kay's poem as inspiration, tell the children that they are going to write some lines about noisy and quiet actions. They need to think of simple noisy things from their homes, such as dogs barking, babies crying and hoovers humming. Next they should think of quiet things around them: goldfish swimming, babies sleeping, parents chatting and snow falling. They can then write a poem that has two verses, one noisy one quiet; or a poem in which the lines contrast with each other in a noisy/quiet/noisy/quiet pattern.

For example:

Noisy and quiet

*Next door's dog barking
My grandad is shouting at the telly
My baby brother's screaming.*

*Next door the dog is whimpering
My mum and dad are chatting
My sister's whispering.*

POET'S TIP

Poems are often about patterns: I started each of these two verses with similar lines, and began the lines that followed them with 'My'. Patterns like these can help structure the poems for the children.

Further ideas

Obviously there are lots of other contrasts possible. The weather is always a good place to start. The children could write wet/dry, hot/cold or sun/ice poems. They could create yuk/tasty poems about things they eat or drink or write tall/short or up/down poems. Discuss with your class how these poems might work; allow the children to be imaginative with the language they use and in how they present the poems. These ideas could be taken into more thoughtful areas, giving rise to who are you?/who am I?, right/wrong or truth/lies poems.

Write a family poem

Recognising that not every child lives with a mum and dad, ask the children if they can choose four people to write about, either relatives or friends. Ask them to write down their choices.

Now they should think of a word or phrase to describe each character, for example: noisy, loud, bossy, loving, funny, ticklish, always singing, always whistling, always laughing, whiskery, naughty, mischievous, shouty, great to be with.

Ask the children to expand on the characters and characteristics they've chosen and complete some verses that echo Jackie Kay's poem. A sample frame for this activity could be:

*My dad is...
He always...
He is like a...*

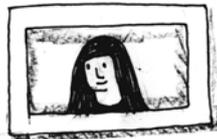
*My mum is...
She sounds like...
Yesterday she...*

*My cousin is really...
She says...
Sometimes I wish...*

*My grandad...
I wish he...
Tomorrow I am going to...*

This frame has a lot of different approaches to the lines it's asking the children to suggest. There are some similes, some actions, some lines about their reflections and wishes. This lends the poem a real variety of possibilities for the children to respond to and you should feel free to use any/all/none of these approaches as you wish.

This activity can lead to poems about friends, being at school, being at home, going on holiday, shopping, playing and so on. Starting with four people and four descriptive words or phrases provides a simple basis from which you can explore any number of topics.



Put yourself in the poem

As a good extension to the previous activity, ask the children to imagine themselves as another member of their family. Following Jackie Kay's example, I've gone for a new, noisy baby.

Here is a frame based on that technique:

I am a new baby

My name is...
I am as noisy as...
As loud as...

When I scream
Next door's rabbit...
And their goldfish...
I make the windows...
And the doors...
I am so loud I...

Outside, everyone...
The dogs and cats all...
Mrs. Jones up the street says...
But I don't...
I like being...

Obviously, this technique can be used with any number of things, from people (mums and dads, older relatives, siblings, friends, teachers) to more abstract ideas like the wind, snow and ice, heat and sunshine, seasons, animals, giants, monsters, ruined castles, trees in a gale, and so on.

The pattern is this:

Verse 1 introduces the speaker and something about them using similes.
Verse 2 talks about the speaker's effect on what (or who) is around them.
Verse 3 carries this on but ends with how the speaker feels about this effect.

Writing haiku and other short poems

Haiku are a very strictly defined form of poetry originating from Japan.

Haiku

Haiku poems have three lines, with five syllables in the first, seven in the second and five in the third. They use images, often from nature, and make a snapshot in time.

An example haiku might be:

*Baby brothers scream
Like storms crashing through tall trees
Then sleep like soft snow.*

By all means have a go at these; they are a great way to teach syllable-based patterns. However, syllable counts can be difficult, and the rule often seems arbitrary. It is just as valid to ask the children to make a long list of similes, based on a model poem, and then arrange them into verses of three lines without worrying about syllable counts. Instead time can be spent on looking at improving the language and images used.

Here are some examples, looking at ideas brought up in Jackie Kay's poem. Ask the class to come up with a big list from which a poem can then be made.

*The baby yells as loudly as a train.
The baby yells like a storm.
Like a racing car howling.
Louder than a lion roaring.
A baby burps like water gurgling in the sink.
Babies curl up in their cot like a leaf.
The baby is crying like a running tap.
Crying like a rainy day.
The baby is sleeping like a quiet night.
The baby sleeps as quietly as falling snow.*

Here is an example of a three line poem using the list. It is based on a haiku but doesn't follow the strict pattern of syllables.

*My baby brother is as loud as a train
He screams like a storm
Then he falls asleep, as quietly as snow falling.*

These poems can stay as separate haiku or be grouped together into a class poem.

Now try this

There are loads of poems about families and relatives that can be used as inspiration for these activities, including: 'Dad's Goal Celebrations' by Paul Cookson and 'Here Comes Ronaldo' by Pam Johnson from *When Dad Scored A Goal In The Garden*, Compiled by John Foster (Oxford University Press, 2014).

'Rooty Tooty' by Carol Ann Duffy, 'My Baby Brother's Secrets' by John Foster, 'Grandpa's Soup' by Jackie Kay and 'Granny Granny Please Comb My Hair' by Grace Nichols, from *Green Glass Beads, Poems for Girls*, Chosen by Jacqueline Wilson (Macmillan Children's Books, 2012).

'Driving Home' by Gerard Benson and 'Sisters' by Mick Gowan, from *The Works 4*, Chosen by Pie Corbett and Gaby Morgan (Macmillan Children's Books, 2005).