

Workbooks / Textbooks / Other Books

In the *Christopher Overview* I deal more fully with this topic, including the ever-popular question: “What do I do when my mother gives my five year-old *Harry Potter*?” Here, I’ll confine myself strictly to science books.

Most of the science workbooks that I have looked at, including those from ‘well respected publishers’, are rubbish. Their usual format is to have a short paragraph on a subject (panda bears, DNA, igneous rocks, etc.) and then ask questions which require no more thought than to scan the said paragraph for the answers! Awful! Some children may find this amusing for a while and it is tempting to use these books for ‘filler’ when you’re overstretched or your State requires more science (or more obvious science) than you’d otherwise do. I think if you treat them like a game and show your child that these books require a certain kind of thinking (sort of like ‘hidden pictures’) and your child enjoys them, then it’s alright. Just don’t ever confuse them with real learning, or real science!

Of course, another problem is that by using these workbooks you’ll be introducing material which you may want to wait with: but that’s going to happen anyway. Unless you keep your child in a closet and only allow her fairy tale books, she’ll be full of words like ‘molecules’, ‘atomic theory’, ‘artificial intelligence’ and ‘genes’ way before she’s ready to deal with these topics intellectually. My advice? Answer her questions imaginatively and in picture-language until she’s about eight or nine, and for a few years after that continue to answer as simply and in as open-ended a manner as possible. Just because you seven year-old asks, “What’s the Human Genome Project”, it doesn’t mean he requires a full explanation of genes, DNA and heredity. A simple answer of “It’s a group of scientists who are interested in the fact that we’re all one big human family” might suffice. Or maybe, “It’s a group of scientists who are working out how human beings are similar and how they are different”.

Back to workbooks, my advice is to use them with care if you feel you must. Better to use textbooks, real books and books of nature and science experiments. But even there, there are many drawbacks...

Textbooks shouldn’t be necessary until high school unless your 12 – 14 year-old is just insatiable in his quest to find out certain information. And, in all honesty, I must admit that my son was a mere eleven years old when he started lugging home high school - even college - level texts on paleontology from the library. We allowed him to do this as it was clearly a deeply felt need, not a passing whim (otherwise we would have said “Not yet. Not until you’re older”). My husband and I felt our job was to gently coax him away from any tendency toward premature fixed ideas, which is the primary danger of precocious intellectualism. When a child is so young he hasn’t had the opportunity to experience enough of life to be able to say to himself, “This is this author’s opinion. It is interesting and worthwhile and I will digest it over time”. Instead, the child or young person, who still lives in the realm of sympathy/antipathy, tends to rush into judgments and opinions: “This is right. This is how it is”. Dogmatism is the result and we can all see the dangers of that in any field of life. In science, it leads to a rigidity which is not in