

Parental Criteria in Book Selection for Preschool Children: A Qualitative Exploration

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ABSTRACT - As books play an increasingly important role in all areas of children's development, parents' criteria for selecting books have become an issue that warrants careful examination in terms of their potential to positively influence developmental outcomes. Accordingly, parental book selection practices have gained prominence as a significant research focus. However, despite this growing importance, there remains a limited number of qualitative studies that explore parents' book selection criteria during the preschool period. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the criteria parents consider when selecting books for their children. The study employed a basic qualitative research design, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 127 parents of children aged 0–6 years, who were recruited using the snowball sampling method. The collected data were analyzed using content analysis. The findings revealed that parents primarily attend to content appropriateness, age suitability, and visual characteristics when selecting books for their children. In contrast, relatively limited attention was given to criteria such as moral values, customs and traditions, relevance to real life, privacy, price, and publishing houses. These results indicate that parents tend to prioritize educational content, developmental appropriateness, and visual appeal, while placing less emphasis on economic, cultural, and ethical considerations. Although parents also consider aesthetic qualities and individual factors such as whether a book aligns with their child's interests, the comparatively limited focus on issues such as morality, privacy, cultural relevance, and real-life applicability suggests that a predominantly content-centered approach guides parents' book selection processes. Overall, while parents favor books that are educational and visually engaging, certain critical dimensions related to ethical, cultural, and contextual suitability may be overlooked.

INTRODUCTION

Reading enhances both people's cognitive and emotional development and contributes to the sustainability of public health (UNESCO, 2006). It also accelerates language development, enrichment of vocabulary, increased attention span, and empathy skills, and supports individual's academic performance and social relationships (Shulman et al., 2024). Reading is a fundamental process that contributes to cognitive and emotional development as well as to the continuity of public health (UNESCO, 2006).

In addition to educational benefits, children's interactions with books support brain development and social interaction skills (Shulman et al., 2024). In this context, the interaction of preschool children with books is a critical preparatory stage that contributes to both their visual and language development and introduces them to the aesthetic language of literature (Kakirman Yıldız, 2016).

In this context, the most effective method for becoming a reading society and raising a generation with a culture of reading is to establish the child's communication with books from the earliest stages of life (Yılmaz, 1989). In the preschool period, also described as the preparation period for reading, children acquire basic skills for identifying everything they see before they start reading, become familiar with writing and books, understand how books work, and begin to recognize letters (Kakirman Yıldız, 2016). As children become acquainted with books, they also become knowledgeable about children's literature. Considering the fundamental functions of books, such as opening the door to the world of literature by instilling language awareness and sensitivity in children and fostering a desire and habit for reading, it becomes clear that books are an effective educational tool in a child's development process (Sever, 2013).

Picture books and other children's literature products are among the first products that guide children in understanding the subtleties of their native language through the visual and linguistic opportunities they offer from the preschool period onwards. In addition, they play an important role in instilling a love of reading and developing reading habits in children (Attar & Maybin, 2016). Illustrated children's books are examples of children's first and important experiences in the field of literature (Gönen., et al., 2016).

Illustrated children's books, which are the first means of communication for children, should be prepared in line with their developmental characteristics, interests, and needs, as emphasized in many sources (Gönen., et al., 2016). Children's books should introduce children to life and humanity with a realistic perspective and be of a quality that prepares children for life (Ceylan et al., 2023). Therefore, importance should be given to the quality preparation of illustrated children's books so that they can have a positive impact on children's development. In this regard, when preparing high-quality children's books, there are certain aspects that must be considered in terms of illustration, content, and physical characteristics. The first aspect to pay attention to is that the author and illustrator work together to harmoniously combine the subject matter (Güleç Çakmak & Gönen Sofuoğlu, 1997).

For picture books to have a positive effect on preschool children, teachers and parents must select picture books with the right qualities (Gönen et al., 2016). During the preschool period, it is the family that will facilitate the interaction between the child and books in terms of reading. In this context, parents should read age-appropriate books to their children and discuss the books with them (Yılmaz, 2004). Because children observe their families during this period and take them as role models, it is important for families to support their children in this regard. By gifting books to their children, introducing them to environments where books are present, and serving as role models for reading, parents can help their children develop a habit of reading and provide them with the necessary support (Yılmaz, 2004).

One of the most important aspects of reading habits that children expect from their families is for their families to help them choose the books they will read. As the people who know their children's interests and tastes best, families have an important responsibility in this regard (Lohann, 1991, cited in Yılmaz, 2004). This is because when families choose books that do not match their children's interests and tastes, these children may not want to read the book or may get bored with it very quickly. Undoubtedly, the basis of the sensitivity shown by families in helping children acquire and develop a habit of reading books is, first and foremost, their awareness of their responsibility in this regard (Yılmaz, 2004). In other words, family sensitivity towards helping children acquire reading and library use habits reflects this sense of responsibility. Children of families who lack this sense of responsibility and sensitivity, and who do not take on this responsibility, are less likely to develop library and reading habits (Yılmaz, 2004).

Families should not only be given the responsibility of instilling a habit of reading books in their children, but also the responsibility of selecting quality children's books for them, and families should be provided with information on this subject. Because most children's books in our country do not specify an age range, and families purchase books based on their own initiative, it becomes imperative for families to be knowledgeable about the qualities of high-quality children's books (Öztürk Samur & Çiftçi, 2018). Piaget evaluated mental development in four stages and emphasized the preoperational stage (ages

2-7) as a phase of very rapid language development (Özmen, 2004; Ömercikoğlu, 2006). Therefore, during this period, parents choosing high-quality books for their children and reading these books to them will contribute significantly to their language development. Children's literature encompasses all high-quality (aesthetic and literary) texts that are appropriate for children's life experiences, interests, needs, development, and perception levels from the age of two until adolescence (Sinar, 2006). A strong relationship established between a child and books during early childhood lays the groundwork for the development of a reading habit in later years. Therefore, parents are responsible for identifying books that are appropriate for their children's developmental characteristics and interests, both in terms of information and entertainment, providing their children with suitable books, and serving as role models. (Öztürk Samur & Çiftçi, 2018).

Although the developmental contributions of children's books and the role of parents in this process are frequently emphasized in the literature, studies that qualitatively examine the criteria parents prioritize in the book selection process, how these criteria are justified, and the factors that shape the selection process are quite limited. The lack of research focusing specifically on the preschool period and revealing parents' perspectives based on their own experiences is particularly noteworthy. Therefore, this study aims to reveal what parents with preschool-aged children pay attention to when choosing books for their children. It aims to help parents become more aware of these criteria and guide them in how to choose books. The following is the main research question:

- *What factors do parents consider when choosing books for their children?*

METHODOLOGY

This research is designed as a qualitative study. Merriam (2023) defines qualitative research as an in-depth perspective on individuals' experiences, worlds of meaning, and social interactions within a specific context. Further, Creswell and Creswell (2017) stated qualitative research is an approach focuses on contextualizing and interpreting participant experiences. A qualitative design was judged suitable for this study since its goal was to investigate the factors preschool parents consider when choosing books for their children. The study was specifically planned as a basic qualitative study, since Tisdell et al. (2025) said it comprehends how people construct their worlds, interpret their experiences, and give meaning to these experiences. The reason for choosing a basic qualitative research design in this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of parents' own views and experiences regarding book selection. This situation made the design the most suitable option for examining parents' book selection criteria during the preschool period. Patton (2014) also mentioned this approach allows researchers to gain a deep understanding of participants' personal experiences.

Participants

To conduct this study 127 parents of children ages 0-6 were selected by following snowball sampling. Snowball sampling makes it easier to find participants who fit the study's requirements, according to Tisdell et al. (2025) since participants recommend other people who fit the study's requirements. This approach was chosen to reach various parent groups through social networks and communication, starting with participants suitable for the study. Creswell and Creswell (2017) also pointed out that it works especially well for reaching particular populations. Due to the large number of participants, data saturation was carefully evaluated; the failure to obtain new and different views during the interviews was accepted as an indication that the research had reached data saturation.

Table 1. Key Features Considered in Children's Books

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants (N = 127)

Demographic Variable	Category	n	%
Parents' Education Level	Primary school	2	1.6
	Middle school	5	3.9
	High school	25	19.7
	University	73	57.5
	Graduate education	22	17.3
	Total	127	100.0
Parents' Age Groups	23–29 years	26	20.5
	30–39 years	83	65.4
	40–49 years	17	13.4
	50 years and above	1	0.8
	Total	127	100.0
Number of Children	One child	59	46.5
	Two children	51	40.2
	Three children	14	11.0
	Four children	3	2.4
	Total	127	100.0

Data Collection

In this study, the interview method was used as the data collection tool. Merriam (2023) defines the interview method as necessary for understanding behaviors, emotions, or how individuals express the world around them that cannot be observed. The interview questions were developed by reviewing the relevant literature. Draft questions were evaluated by two experts not involved in the research, and necessary adjustments were made based on their expert opinions. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and individually, with each interview lasting an average of 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by applying content analysis. Tisdell et al. (2025) state that content analysis entails finding recurrent patterns in the data, classifying them, and coding them. A strong analytical framework for qualitative research is offered by systematic categorization and theme identification (Patton, 2014). During analysis, all these steps were followed by the researchers.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

Merriam (2023) said the validity of the study can be enhanced by expert feedback from a colleague who is knowledgeable about the research topic, therefore two experts reviewed the interview form's questions. Based on their suggestions, interview questions were revised and finalized before data collection process started. Categorization, preliminary analysis, review of preliminary findings, and result refinement were additional steps in the qualitative data analysis process (Patton, 2014). All these steps were followed by the researchers during analysis. Finally, two researchers coded the data individually then, calculated the codes as Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested and found %94 similarity.

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the XXX University Non-Interventional Clinical Research Ethics Committee with the Decision No: GO 2025/1678.

Findings

In the study, data regarding the criteria parents with children aged 0-6 consider when selecting books for their children were analyzed based on the parents' responses.

Key Features Considered in Children's Books

Table 1. Key Features Considered in Children's Books

Key Features	f
Content Suitability	83
Age Suitability	43
Visual Features	31
Suitability for the Child's Interest	16
Suitability for the Child's Development	12
Language and Narrative	12
Book Cover Design	11
Morals, Traditions, Customs, and Values	6
Recommendation	6
Intelligence, Imagination, and Creativity	5
Author	5
Writing	5
Pedagogically Approved	5
Routine	5
Message Conveyed	5
Publisher	3
Theme	2
Book Internal Structure Features	2
Classic Book	1
Privacy	1
Writing About Real Things	1
Summary	1
Price	1

When examining the key features parents consider while selecting children's books, the findings reveal that parents primarily prioritize content-related characteristics, while also attributing importance to visual features and age appropriateness. The analysis shows that parents' evaluations cluster around several interrelated themes rather than isolated criteria. Under the theme of Content and Meaning Characteristics, parents referred to categories such as theme, content appropriateness, summary, the message conveyed, classic books, and content related to real life. These categories indicate that parents view children's books not merely as entertainment tools but as meaningful resources that convey values, messages, and real-life connections. Closely related to this theme, the Child Appropriateness theme includes categories such as age appropriateness, suitability for the child's developmental level, suitability for the child's interests, and compatibility with the child's daily routines. This suggests that parents adopt a child-centered perspective, emphasizing developmental and individual needs in the book selection process.

The theme of Language and Expression encompasses categories related to language use and writing style, highlighting parents' attention to clarity, comprehensibility, and linguistic suitability for children. Similarly, the Visual and Physical Characteristics theme includes book cover design and the internal structural features of the book, reflecting the role of visual appeal and physical design in attracting children's attention, particularly in early childhood. Another prominent theme, Values and Cultural Suitability, includes categories such as ethics, traditions, customs, and values. This theme underscores parents' sensitivity to cultural and moral alignment when selecting books for their children. The Educational and Pedagogical Features theme comprises pedagogical suitability and the extent to which books support intelligence, imagination, and creativity, indicating that parents also consider the educational potential of children's books. Finally, the Environmental and Book Source theme includes

categories such as author name, publisher recommendation, and price, representing external and pragmatic considerations influencing book selection.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that while parents primarily focus on content appropriateness as a central criterion, they simultaneously consider visual features, age suitability, developmental relevance, and cultural values in a holistic manner. This multidimensional approach is reflected in participants' statements. For instance, P1 stated, *"I pay attention to the absence of inappropriate content and ensure it is educational,"* while P116 emphasized content and value alignment by noting, *"I pay attention to the topic, content, and religious aspects."* Attention to the child's interests and developmental level was also evident, as P2 explained, *"It should be suitable for my child's development, easy to understand, and applicable in daily life,"* and P4 stated, *"I consider my child's interests and needs."* Cultural sensitivity emerged strongly in P112's remark: *"I check whether it aligns with our values; if it does, I purchase it. Recently, my daughter wanted a book with Santa Claus, which I didn't buy as it contradicts our traditions."* In addition, some parents highlighted pedagogical and expert-based criteria, such as P44's emphasis on *"pedagogical approval"* and P49's preference for *"books recommended by the teacher."* In contrast, comparatively less emphasis was placed on criteria such as reading the book in advance or price considerations, as reflected in statements like P13's *"I read the books before selecting them"* and P63's *"I pay attention to the price."*

Table 2. Features Parents Believe Should Be Considered

Key Features	f
Visual Features	74
Content Suitability	64
Language and Narrative	45
Book Cover Design	23
Appeal to Children's Interests	20
Theme	17
All Features	15
Suitability for Child Development	10
Suitability for Child's Age	8
Writing	7
Publisher	2
Morals, Traditions, Customs, and Values	2
Relevance to Real Life	2
Intelligence, Imagination, and Creativity	2
Message Conveyed	1
High Literary Value	1
Author	1
Social media	1
Routine	1

Regarding the features parents believe should be prioritized in children's books, the findings indicate that parents emphasize visual features, content suitability, and language and narrative as central considerations. The analysis demonstrates that these features are evaluated within a thematic framework that closely parallels the criteria parents use when selecting books, highlighting consistency between selection practices and prioritization beliefs. Under the theme of Visual and External Design, parents referred to *visual features*, *book cover design*, and *writing* (including font size and readability). Parents viewed visual features as essential for attracting children's attention, while also expressing concern about the meanings conveyed through images. For example, P93 stated, *"Visuals are important because innocent images may have non-innocent backgrounds."* In addition, some parents emphasized the physical qualities of books, such as durability, as part of external design considerations. P86 noted, *"Books should be water-resistant and durable,"* reflecting practical concerns related to children's daily use of books.

The theme of Language and Narrative includes the categories *language and narrative* and *writing*. Parents highlighted the importance of clear, correct, and developmentally appropriate language use in children's books. This perspective underscores parents' expectation that books should support children's language development while maintaining narrative clarity. For instance, P3 emphasized

content and language together, noting the importance of ensuring that “*the language teaches Turkish correctly.*” Under the theme of Educational and Developmental Features, parents referred to *content suitability, suitability for child development, suitability for the child’s age, message conveyed, relevance to real life, and intelligence, imagination, and creativity.* These categories indicate that parents expect children’s books to serve an educational function by supporting cognitive, emotional, and developmental growth. Parents emphasized that content should be appropriate to the child’s developmental level and age while conveying meaningful messages connected to real-life experiences.

The Value-Oriented and Child-Centered Features theme encompasses *appeal to children’s interests and morals, traditions, customs, and values,* as well as references to *social media.* Parents frequently highlighted the child’s personal interest as a key priority in book selection. This was clearly articulated by P123, who stated, “*Above all, my child’s liking is the most important.*” At the same time, some parents expressed sensitivity to value alignment and the influence of popular culture, reflecting cautious consideration of external influences on children. Finally, the Book-Oriented Features theme includes *publisher, author, and routine.* Although mentioned less frequently, these features suggest that some parents associate book quality with trusted publishers or authors and view books as tools for establishing regular reading habits. For example, author-related considerations were noted by P121, while routine-related aspects were mentioned by parents who emphasized integrating books into children’s daily lives.

Overall, these findings indicate that parents prioritize visual features and content suitability as complementary dimensions rather than competing criteria. While visual features are considered important for engaging children, content suitability and language quality are viewed as essential for ensuring that books fulfill their educational and developmental roles. This parallel structure with the previous findings highlights parents’ consistent and multidimensional approach to evaluating children’s books.

Table 3. Identifying Engaging Elements and Strategies

Key Features	f
Child’s Interest	60
Visual Appeal	26
Not Using Strategy	13
Content	10
Daily Life	5
Conversation	5
Age	5
Child’s Choice	4
Language	4
Parent Chooses	3
Book Cover Features	3
Book Interior Features	3
Trial and Error	3
We Choose Together	3
Children’s Games, Toys	3
Writing	2
I Review Books	2
Recommendation	2
The Message It Conveys	2
Gender Factor	2
Popular, Award-Winning Books	2
By Getting to Know My Child	1
Imagination	1
Pedagogical and Developmental Suitability	1
The Book’s Subject and Main Idea	1

The findings related to identifying engaging elements and strategies indicate that parents predominantly adopt child-centered approaches when selecting children’s books, prioritizing the child’s immediate interests, curiosity, and attention over formal literary or structural criteria. Rather than relying on rigid or

predefined strategies, parents tend to employ flexible and situational practices shaped by their child's characteristics and daily experiences. Under the theme of Child-Centered Strategies, parents referred to codes such as *child's interest*, *child's choice*, *age*, *gender factor*, *imagination*, *by getting to know my child*, and *pedagogical and developmental suitability*. Parents emphasized observing their children's interests, questions, and preferences as a primary way of identifying engaging books. For instance, P25 stated, "*I observe my child's curiosity and questions about the environment*," illustrating how children's spontaneous interests guidebook selection. Similarly, some parents highlighted the importance of age and developmental characteristics, aligning book choices with the child's current developmental stage. This theme reflects a strong focus on understanding the child's world and selecting books accordingly.

The theme of Visual and Structural Elements includes *visual appeal*, *book cover features*, *book interior features*, *writing*, and *language*. Parents noted that visual appeal plays a key role in initially attracting children to books. P76 emphasized the importance of visuals in capturing attention, while other parents indicated that elements such as font style, internal layout, and overall design contribute to sustained engagement. These findings suggest that visual and structural features function as supportive tools that enhance children's interest rather than as standalone selection criteria. Under the theme of Process- and Interaction-Oriented Strategies, parents referred to *daily life*, *conversation*, *we choose together*, *parent chooses*, *I review books*, *children's games*, *toys*, and *writing*. Parents described strategies that involve linking books to children's daily experiences, engaging in conversations about book content, and participating in the selection process together with their children. For example, P97 explained, "*When my child started preschool, I selected books about separation from parents, while ensuring they are enjoyable and instill a love for reading*," demonstrating how life transitions and daily experiences shape book choices. Collaborative decision-making was also evident, as P98 noted selecting books together with the child, while others considered children's favorite activities and conversations (P5, P64).

The theme of Trial-Based and External Source Strategies includes *not using strategy*, *trial and error*, *recommendation*, and *popular, award-winning books*. Some parents explicitly stated that they do not follow a specific strategy and instead rely on personal judgment. For instance, P116 remarked, "*I have no particular strategy; I choose according to my judgment*." Others reported experimenting with different books through trial and error or relying on external sources such as recommendations, popularity, or award status. These approaches indicate that parents sometimes supplement child-centered practices with experiential or socially informed decision-making processes.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that parents tend to adopt a flexible, child-focused, and experience-based approach when identifying engaging elements and strategies in children's book selection. Rather than prioritizing the literary qualities of books in isolation, parents foreground the child's current interests, attention span, and everyday experiences, suggesting that engagement is perceived as a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped primarily by the child.

Table 4. Content-Related Evaluations and Insights

Key Features	f
Subject	38
Age	19
I read the book	17
Child Development	15
Visual	14
Language	12
Child's Interest	9
Writing	9
Tradition, Customs, Religion, and Culture	8
Recommendation	8
Imagination	5
Publisher	5
Research	5
Book Cover Feature	4
Daily Life, Future Life	4

Message, Lesson	3
Author	2
Mother	1
Approach	1
Atatürk-themed	1
Current Book	1
Main Idea	1
Classic Book	1
Solid Content	1
Conversation	1
All	1
We Read Together	1

The findings related to content-based evaluations indicate that parents approach children's books with a strong focus on educational value, developmental appropriateness, and meaningful content, while simultaneously exercising personal control over the selection process. Parents' evaluations reflect a multi-layered assessment in which content is examined not only in terms of subject matter but also in relation to cultural values, parental judgment, and external sources of recommendation. Under the theme of Educational and Developmental Appropriateness, parents referred to codes such as *subject*, *main idea*, *solid content*, *age*, *child development*, *language*, *writing*, *message/lesson*, and *imagination*. Parents emphasized that book content should be aligned with the child's developmental level and age while also contributing to learning, creativity, and moral understanding. This perspective was reflected in P4's statement: *"I prefer books that are educational, entertaining, creative, and address questions my child may have. Topics like bullying, friendship, sharing, lying, and values are prioritized."* Similarly, P50 highlighted developmental suitability, stating, *"I try to choose books appropriate for my child's age and development."* These evaluations demonstrate that parents perceive content as a central mechanism through which books support children's cognitive, emotional, and educational growth. The theme of Parental Control and Review includes codes such as *I read the book*, *we read together*, *conversation*, *approach*, *visual*, and *book cover feature*. Parents frequently reported personally reviewing books before purchase or use, indicating an active and deliberate role in content evaluation. For instance, P58 stated, *"I skim through it quickly,"* illustrating how parents conduct preliminary assessments to ensure content suitability. Joint reading and dialogue were also mentioned as ways of monitoring and interpreting book content together with the child.

Under the theme of Sociocultural and National Values, parents referred to *tradition*, *customs*, *religion*, and *culture*, *Atatürk-themed*, and *daily life*, *future life*. Parents emphasized the importance of selecting books that align with their cultural, religious, and national values, viewing books as tools for transmitting these values to children. This was evident in P117's statement: *"I do not buy books with pig illustrations as it contradicts our religious values."* Similarly, P16 noted, *"My child loves Atatürk; when she sees his image, it gives her confidence, so we choose content aligned with Atatürk and Republican principles."* P67 also emphasized cultural alignment, stating, *"Books should align with our religion and culture."* These statements indicate that parents consciously evaluate content as a means of reflecting and reinforcing sociocultural identity. The theme of Environmental Recommendations and Source-Based Evaluations includes codes such as *recommendation*, *publisher*, *author*, *classic book*, *current book*, and *research*. Some parents reported relying on external sources such as recommendations, publisher credibility, or author recognition when evaluating content. However, these factors were generally framed as supplementary rather than decisive, suggesting that environmental inputs inform but do not replace parental judgment.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that parents prioritize children's developmental and educational needs when evaluating book content, while also maintaining strong parental agency in the decision-making process. Rather than relying solely on environmental recommendations, parents draw on their own experiences, values, and assessments. The emphasis on religious, cultural, and national values further highlights that parents perceive children's books as important tools for conveying moral and cultural meanings, positioning content selection as both an educational and value-oriented practice.

Table 5. Researching and Reviewing Books

Key Features	f
I do research and reviewing	122
I do not research and reviewing	25

The findings related to researching and reviewing books indicate that parents differ in the extent to which they engage in deliberate investigation prior to selecting children's books. Parents' responses cluster around two distinct themes, reflecting contrasting approaches to the book selection process. Under the theme of Parents Who Do Not Research and Review, parents explicitly stated that they do not conduct any prior research or systematic review before selecting books. These parents described book selection as an intuitive or time-constrained process, often relying on immediate judgment or familiarity with their child's preferences. For example, P18 stated, *"I don't research; I don't have time,"* highlighting time limitations as a primary reason for not engaging in research. Similarly, P100 explained, *"I don't research because I know what my child likes,"* suggesting that parental confidence in understanding the child's interests replaces the need for external investigation. Some parents also reported not examining books at all prior to purchase or use, as reflected in P13's statement indicating no inspection of books. These findings suggest that for many parents, book selection is perceived as a spontaneous and situational activity rather than a planned or analytical process.

In contrast, the theme of Parents Who Research and Review includes parents who reported actively investigating books before selection. These parents described engaging in various forms of review, such as examining the publisher, publication date, and author information (P86), browsing book pages online (P122), or briefly reviewing books in bookstores (P103). Such practices indicate a more deliberate and structured approach to book selection, where parents seek to ensure quality, credibility, and suitability before making a decision. This theme reflects a planned selection process grounded in external information sources and evaluative criteria. Overall, these findings demonstrate that while a considerable number of parents tend to avoid researching books and instead rely on immediate judgment or familiarity with their child, a smaller group adopts a more systematic and intentional approach. Parents who engage in research place particular emphasis on author and publisher information, suggesting a trust in established sources as indicators of quality. This contrast highlights that book selection practices range from spontaneous, experience-based decisions to more planned and information-driven processes, shaped by parental time availability, confidence, and perceived necessity of research.

Table 6. Balancing Content, Visuals, Language, and Themes

Key Features	f
Visuals	75
Content	57
Language	39
Theme	19
All	16
Writing	6
Child's Interest, Curiosity, Needs, etc.	4
Age Group	4
Moral Values	3
Age	2
Child's Development	2
Book Cover Feature	2
Content and visuals should not be morally corrupting	1
Daily Life	1
Talking and communicating about it	1

The findings indicate that parents do not evaluate children's books by prioritizing a single feature in isolation; rather, they seek to establish a balance among content, visuals, language, and thematic coherence. Parents' evaluations reflect an integrative perspective in which different components of the book are expected to complement one another to support both engagement and developmental value.

Under the theme of Aesthetic and Physical Features, parents referred to *visuals*, *book cover feature*, *writing*, and design elements that stimulate the child's *interest and curiosity*. Visuals were frequently described as the first element that attracts children's attention, but parents emphasized that illustrations should be appropriate, consistent, and non-frightening. For instance, P96 highlighted the importance of illustrations that do not scare children, while P109 stated, *"I ensure the visuals align with the text to avoid confusion; for instance, the depiction of an animal should be consistent across books."* These statements indicate that parents view visual design not merely as decorative, but as a functional component that supports comprehension and engagement.

The theme of Educational and Developmental Features includes *content*, *theme*, *all*, *age group*, *age*, *child's development*, and the expectation that *content and visuals should not be morally corrupting*. Parents emphasized the quality of content, thematic unity, and the harmony among all elements of the book. Some parents prioritized content depending on the purpose of reading, as reflected in P103's statement: *"Sometimes I prefer religious content, sometimes books about nature, animals, or moral lessons, so content is prioritized."* This theme demonstrates that parents assess books in relation to developmental appropriateness and the overall coherence of educational messages conveyed through text and visuals. Under the theme of Language and Ethical Values, parents referred to *language*, *moral values*, *daily life*, and *talking and communicating about it*. Parents expressed concern that book content should not lead to moral deterioration and should instead support ethical development. P42 emphasized moral values as an important consideration, while other parents highlighted the importance of linking book content to daily life and using books as tools for communication and dialogue with children. These findings suggest that parents expect language and themes to facilitate moral reflection, everyday relevance, and interaction between parent and child.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that parents aim to maintain a balanced evaluation of children's books by considering how visuals, content, language, and themes interact with one another. Rather than privileging a single component, parents seek harmony among aesthetic appeal, educational and developmental suitability, and ethical considerations. This balance-oriented approach highlights parents' perception of children's books as multidimensional resources that must simultaneously engage, educate, and align with family values.

Table 7. Influence of Books on Imagination and Creativity

Key Features	f
It contributes to the development of imagination	90
It affects different areas of development and daily life skills	18
I don't think it's very effective	6
Understanding this is not decisive at the moment	3

Parents largely perceived books as powerful tools for fostering children's imagination and creativity. Many parents described books as opening imaginative spaces that allow children to immerse themselves in stories, adopt different perspectives, and engage creatively with narratives. P97 highlighted the role of interactive reading, stating, *"If we select the right books and read interactively, it opens a door for children to immerse in the world of books, enjoy reading, and develop imagination."* Several parents also viewed books as an important alternative to screen-based activities. P121 noted that children experience stories as if they are part of them, emphasizing that books support imaginative engagement at a time when screens may limit creative play. Beyond imagination, parents reported that books contribute to multiple developmental areas, including language development, social-emotional skills, problem-solving abilities, and daily life competencies.

A small number of parents expressed uncertainty or skepticism regarding the impact of books on imagination, indicating that they either perceived the effect as limited or felt it was too early to make a clear judgment. However, these views were notably less prevalent. Overall, the findings suggest that parents largely recognize children's books as key resources for supporting imaginative, creative, and holistic development. Parents tend to view books not only as educational materials but also as developmental tools that contribute to children's broader cognitive, emotional, and social growth.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings indicate that when examining the characteristics that parents pay attention to when selecting books for their preschool children, it was observed that they pay the most attention to content appropriateness. This finding supports what Akıncı Coşgun & Akkurt (2022) found that parents pay attention to content appropriateness when selecting books for their children. International research also mentioned similar results. For instance, Rideout (2014) said parents value books that support cognitive and socio-emotional development, while Justice and Sofka (2010) emphasize the role of age-appropriate texts in structuring early literacy skills in the USA. In Europe, Sipe (2007) reported parents generally prefer stories with a clear structure, moral messages, and relatable themes. It is stated that these preferences are consistent with both educational expectations and family values. This situation shows that the parents participating in the study did not view book selection as merely a simple act of purchasing; through parental mediation and involvement, they sought to instill the behaviors they wanted their children to acquire through the 'content'.

According to participants, age appropriateness and aesthetic appearance are also significant factors that parents consider while choosing books for their children. Kiefer (2010) stated that pictures have a strong impact on capturing children's attention and choosing what they want to read. Arizpe and Styles (2016) also emphasized the role of visuals in contributing to children's comprehension processes. Similarly, Sipe (2007) reported that parents frequently preferred books with visually strong narratives because they believed they would capture their children's attention and stimulate their imagination. In addition to that, based on parents' responses, book's price has been found to be the least influential factor in book selection. Clark and Rumbold (2006) stated middle and high-income families in the UK focus more on quality than cost when selecting books. In Türkiye, Kalaycıoğlu (2012) revealed that economic conditions negatively affect book purchases in low-income households while Pekdoğan (2017) stated parents do not consider price when selecting books. In addition, the fact that parents participating in the study value visual appeal increases children's attention to the book and lays the groundwork for interactive reading. Parents' tendency to place authors and publishers in the background indicates that they make results-oriented choices based more on the appeal and educational value of the books.

The findings also showed parents prefer more visual elements that attract their children's attention and on the overall potential for interaction while purchasing book. Notably, most parents stated that they did not use a specific method to evaluate these elements. The limited guidance in the current literature on how parents can determine their children's interest makes this an important gap. In fact, Daniels et al. (2022) noted that parents' choices are mostly based on immediate visual appeal rather than pedagogical value, while Fletcher and Reese (2005) stated that many parents make intuitive decisions rather than systematic evaluations. The research shows that parents make more impulsive decisions when choosing books and do not evaluate their choices during the selection process; this situation indicates that it stems from parents' lack of knowledge and time regarding quality children's books.

Parents in this study claimed when they examine book's content, they placed particular importance on elements such as subject matter, educational value, and developmental appropriateness. These findings support what Öztürk et al. (2018) found language, subject matter, characters, and narrative style as Turkish families' evaluation criteria while choosing books for their kids. Niklas and Schneider (2017) noted German parents specifically chose books that supported vocabulary development and reading readiness. Also, Saracho (2017) and Sénéchal and LeFevre (2014) indicated that parents in North America prioritized linguistic simplicity and educational suitability. According to findings, cultural and religious alignment also emerged as an important factor for parents to choose a book for their children in this study. This finding is consistent with the results reported by Saracho and Spodek (2010), who found that 57% of families prefer books that align with their cultural context. Similarly, Li and Rao (2010) reported that Chinese parents preferred books that reinforced collectivist values and academic achievement; in the Middle Eastern context, Barza and Suchodoletz (2017) reported that cultural and religious alignment was a determining factor in parental preferences. This situation shows that parents impart the sociocultural values they wish to instill in their children through children's books; they perceive children's books not only as tools that facilitate their children's holistic development but also as products that convey family and sociocultural values.

Another important finding is a significant proportion of parents do not search before purchasing books. Although the number of studies examining this behavior in detail is limited, it is known that systematic evaluation is rare in many cultural contexts. For example, Honan (2008) noted that Australian parents generally choose books based on their children's preferences rather than expert opinions, while Burgess et al. (2002) stated that American parents mostly consider easy access or peer recommendations. According to Tanju Aslışen and Hakkoymaz (2023), Turkish parents place considerable importance on age and developmental appropriateness. This finding suggests that parents' decision-making processes are based on first impressions and shaped by the situation rather than evidence-based systematic evaluation. The main reason for this situation identified in the study is that parents tend to make impulsive decisions rather than conducting detailed research and analysis when selecting books. They also focus on their role as mediators and concentrate on the immediate impact of the book on the child rather than conducting more research and analysis.

When examining the balance between language, theme, visuals, and content, the findings reveal that parents generally prioritize visual elements over other factors, followed by content and linguistic clarity. International research also frequently emphasizes the importance of visuals in child interaction. Nikolajeva and Scott (2013) explain the role of visuals in developing multiple literacy skills, while Arizpe and Styles (2016) state that pictures strengthen interpretation skills and narrative comprehension. In this study, most parents stated that books positively affected their children's imagination and creativity. Sipe (2007) states that creative story plots support children's abstract thinking and problem-solving skills, while Pantaleo (2017) reports that parents in Canada actively choose books that encourage creative thinking and critical perspective. The reason parents prioritize visual appeal in research is that their children are in a younger age group. This approach aims to both capture children's attention toward books and support the visual understanding processes of children in this age group who have not yet learned to read and write.

In general, this study reveals that parents prioritize content appropriateness, age level appropriateness, visual appeal, and educational value when selecting books for the preschool period; factors such as price, publisher, or cultural compatibility are relatively less important. However, the fact that parental decisions are largely based on unplanned and momentary assessments highlights the need for more systematic awareness in book selection. The main reason parents focus on content and visuals is that they place greater importance on the direct and observable effect the book has on the child. The fact that factors such as price, author, and publisher take a backseat to content and visuals shows that parents consider the book's effect on the child to be more important than factors such as the author and publisher, which they deem less significant and not worth examining. The reason for the impulsive and unplanned nature of these decisions is that parents view book selection as a shopping experience shaped by the child's immediate reactions rather than a planned and systematic process.

Based on the results, it is recommended to researchers could use broader and more diverse socio-cultural samples and conduct quantitative or mixed methods to explore parents' book selection criteria broadly. Also, examining different cultural contexts can provide important comparative information about literacy traditions, family structures, and the role of economic resources. Furthermore, longitudinal studies can reveal the impact of parental selection criteria on children's literacy development and reading motivation from birth to six years since each year has a different and significant stage and features.

Finally, parents should be educated by providing adequate information about how to choose books appropriately. Both school districts and teachers should incorporate to support parents to learn conscious and reflective strategies for book selection. Since books' prices is considered a selection feature by parents Ministry of National Education can provide children with appropriate free books. The Ministry of National Education can prepare booklets to guide parents on what to look for when selecting quality books. In addition, teachers can provide informative training on how families can understand quality books. Future research should examine parents' book selection criteria comparatively in the context of cultural values and family structures through cross-cultural studies.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Özge Özel involve with conceptualization, research design, data collection and data analysis. While Hazal Küçükkebabcı involve with literature review, data collection, data coding and validation.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations involving participants but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

The authors used a generative AI tool solely for language editing and improving the readability of the manuscript. The AI tool was not used for study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, or drawing conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the content of this manuscript.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation.

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