



## Rethinking 'The Three Little Pigs'

BY ELLEN WOLPERT

**T**here's scarcely a parent or young child who isn't familiar with "The Three Little Pigs." It has a simple plot line, is easily remembered, and it's so much fun imitating the big bad wolf as he huffs and puffs and "blo-o-ws" the house down.

I find the story is also useful to talk about the stereotypes in many of our favorite tales.

I first became aware of the story's hidden messages when we were doing a unit on housing at my daycare center. As part of the unit, we talked about different homes and the many approaches to solving a basic human need: a place to live.

During the discussion I suddenly thought to myself, "Why are brick homes better than straw homes?"

To this day, I'm not completely sure why that question popped into my mind. I do know, however, that I had been sensitized by the movement for a multicultural curriculum, which had taught me to take a questioning approach to even the most seemingly innocuous materials and to look beneath the surface for hidden assumptions.

After thinking about it, I realized that one of the most fundamental messages of "The Three Little Pigs" is that it belittles straw and stick homes and the "lazy types" who build them. On the other hand,

the story extols the virtues of brick homes, suggesting that they are built by serious, hardworking people and are strong enough to withstand adversity.

Is there any coincidence that brick homes tend to be built by people in Western countries, often by those with more money? That straw homes are more common in non-European cultures, particularly Africa and Asia?

Once I realized some of these hidden messages, the question became what to do about it. In my experience, the best approach is not to put down such beloved tales and refuse to read them, but to use them to pose questions for children. One might explain, for example, that in many

tropical areas straw homes are built to take best advantage of cooling breezes. In some areas, straw homes are on stilts as protection from insects and animals or to withstand flooding.

Such a perspective then becomes part of a broader process of helping children to understand why homes are different in different parts of the world—and that just because something is different doesn't mean it's inferior. ■

**Ellen Wolpert** has been an early childhood educator since 1970 and is the coordinator of the Cambridge Community Partnerships for Children in Massachusetts.