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Features of illustrating books for children of different age groups

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Abstract. In the context of the rapid development of digital media and changes in visual culture, the creation of high-quality, aesthetically coherent, and psychologically grounded illustrative material becomes especially important, as it is capable of maintaining attention, fostering the development of imaginative thinking, and forming visual literacy in children of different age groups. The purpose of the work was to identify stylistic, compositional and technological features of the design of a children's book, taking into account the age characteristics of the reader. To achieve this goal, visual-analytical, comparative-typological and system-analytical methods were used. The article investigated the main features of illustrating books for children of different ages. It was substantiated that illustrating books significantly affects the formation of the worldview of the future generation, since illustration is often the first visual experience of a child, and the perception of the surrounding world depends on its quality and content. Their influence on the content and placement of text for each age group has been determined. Special attention was paid to the peculiarities of cooperation between illustrators and editors to form a holistic image of a children's book. The main stages of work on illustration, as well as the basic principles and significance of artistic design, were highlighted. The relevance of improving the illustrative accompaniment of children's books as an important factor in the formation of aesthetic perception, creative thinking and reading culture in children of different ages has been investigated. Particular attention was paid to taking into account the psychological and cognitive features of children's perception as a key task for illustrators, designers and editors working in the field of children's book publishing. The practical value of the study lies in the development of methodological recommendations for illustrators, designers and publishers on optimising the graphic design of children's publications in accordance with the age structure of the readership

Keywords: visual storytelling; narrative imagery; cognitive development; artistic techniques; pictorial analysis; reader engagement; visual semiotics

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INTRODUCTION

The relevance of this study lies in its timely exploration of the evolving role of illustration in children's literature, particularly against the backdrop of a rapidly changing visual culture and information environment. As children become increasingly exposed to diverse media, the quality and character of book illustrations are vital in shaping their cognitive, emotional, and cultural development. Understanding the intricate relationship between visual storytelling and young readers' engagement provides valuable insights for educators, publishers, and content creators, ensuring that children's books remain both meaningful and effective in fostering imagination, literacy, and critical thinking skills in the new digital age.

Recent studies emphasised that illustrations serve not merely as decorative elements but as an integral visual language that interprets and expands the meaning of the text. Researcher M. Babkina & B. Babkina (2021) pointed out that well-constructed images function as narrative extensions, guiding the child's emotional and cognitive understanding of the story. Modern scholarship highlighted a growing interest in the development of graphic culture within children's literature. For instance, R. Guo & A. Yulia's (2024) publication offered an insightful analysis of strategies for creating picture books that foster both cognitive and imaginative development in children. Drawing on recent trends and research in children's literature and illustration, the authors situated their findings within a broader context of evolving book design and educational practices, as reflected in adjacent studies and conference proceedings.

H. Novik & P. Zemtsova (2021) explored the evolution of visual approaches in children's book design, focusing on the integration of conceptual symbolism and atmospheric imagery. Their research highlighted that contemporary children's book illustrations increasingly use abstract and symbolic elements to create a deeper emotional and intellectual connection with young readers, inviting them to engage with the story on different levels. Similarly, V. Oliynyk (2023) analysed the structural and compositional principles of contemporary Ukrainian printed books, identifying key design features that improve readability and promote emotional engagement. The author emphasised how the thoughtful placement of text and images, as well as design elements such as colour and layout, significantly contribute to a more engaging and accessible reading experience for children.

Study C. Axell & J. Boström (2021) showed that picture books used in Swedish preschools predominantly present traditionally masculine-coded technological artefacts by focusing on their isolated functions rather than their societal context, thereby reinforcing early gendered perceptions of technology. The paper of C.N. Peters (2024) demonstrated that creating and

teaching the creation of children's books offers an effective, sustainable model of science communication that engages communities, trains early-career scientists, and bridges scientific research with public understanding. Colour, form and emotional expression as key components of child-oriented design were analysed by J. Bai *et al.* (2022), emphasising the importance of age-appropriate visual solutions.

A.D. Koshka *et al.* (2025) study examined the evolution of illustrated books within the Ukrainian cultural sphere, focusing on the interplay between traditional motifs and contemporary design through an analysis of Ivan Franko's works. The authors provided insight into how authorial design reflects broader shifts in Ukrainian publishing, situating their findings within current trends in children's literature and book illustration. The article by Z. Wu & Y. Wang (2025) explored how contemporary illustrations for children's books are evolving, combining traditional artistic techniques with the latest digital technologies to meet the growing demands of young readers. The authors also emphasised the sociocultural significance of visual narratives, which influence the development of emotional sensitivity and cultural tolerance in children.

Overall, the analysed literature showed that children's book illustration is a multifaceted phenomenon that integrates artistic, pedagogical, and technological aspects, confirming the relevance of its systematic study in contemporary publishing practice and confirming that it is becoming an increasingly dynamic field of artistic and academic research. The study aimed to establish the fundamental visual, structural, and technological principles that ensure age-appropriate design of children's books and, based on these findings, to formulate methodological guidance for professionals involved in their graphic production.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research methodology was based on a comprehensive content analysis of contemporary children's book illustrations, combined with pedagogical, psychological, and design-oriented approaches. The study applied several scientific methods that made it possible to systematise illustrative materials and identify graphic strategies suitable for different age groups. The method of content analysis was used to examine the compositional structure, stylistic solutions, dominant colour palettes, and the correspondence between visual and textual components. This method enabled the classification of illustrations according to colour harmony, character design, emotional expressiveness, symbolic depth, and structural organisation of the visual narrative. Comparative analysis was applied to evaluate differences in illustration styles across age categories and publishing formats. This helped determine how visual complexity, detail, and narrative density correlate with

children's cognitive abilities and perceptual development. Descriptive and structural methods were used to examine the organisation of interaction between authors and illustrators, the placement and frequency of illustrations, and the functional load of graphic elements such as maps, diagrams, symbolic motifs, episodic compositions, and spreads.

The research procedure included several consecutive stages: selection of materials, which involved identifying current children's book editions published within the last decade; evaluation of illustration quality according to criteria such as emotional expressiveness, clarity of composition, character relevance, developmental appropriateness, and the balance between text and imagery; classification of illustrative materials by visual style and intended age category; analysis of psychological and pedagogical sources on children's perception of visual information; generalisation of findings to determine the graphic strategies most effective for each age group. The selection of illustrations was grounded in the principle of representativeness and included works by contemporary illustrators whose materials were available in open sources. The analysed illustrations included works by: Clotilda Gubeli, Nataliya Kudliak, Simone Abel, Rostyslav Popsky, Yevheniya Gapchynska, Nataliya Gaida, Chris Riddell, Jim Kay, Brian Selznick, Kathleen Jennings, Vladyslav Yerko, Rodrigo Corral, Tom Sanderson, Karina Granda. Each illustrator was selected based on distinct stylistic features and the relevance of their works to the thematic and age-specific criteria of the study.

The interpretation of visual materials was supported by psychological and pedagogical concepts describing children's emotional response, imagination development, and visual literacy formation. These foundations allowed the study to determine how colour, composition, symbolic motifs, and character representation influence the cognitive and emotional reception of young readers. The methodological approach employed in the study made it possible to identify developmental, emotional, and artistic patterns that determine the effectiveness of illustration for each age group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Comparative analysis showed that illustration in children's books performs a wide range of functions – cognitive, emotional, structural and communicative. The combination of textual and visual content ensures narrative coherence and facilitates the child's transition from concrete sensory perception to higher-order symbolic understanding. The findings consistently demonstrated that, across all age groups, illustration remains essential for supporting reading motivation, developing imagination, and enhancing narrative interpretation. Table 1 presented core visual parameters – such as dominant colour strategies, level of detail, compositional complexity and narrative function – that were identified as most relevant for preschool, early school, middle school and early teenage readers. These parameters reflect both the empirical observations obtained during the research and the theoretical positions presented by contemporary scholars (Elysieieva & Myronova, 2025).

Table 1. Comparative characteristics of some requirements for printing publications for children of different age groups

Groups	Age readers	Font size for main text	Recommended illustrative edition	Number of hyphenations per page
First	up to 6 years old	14 and more	50% or more	up to 4
Second	6 to 10 years old	14 and more, and for scholars of III-IV grades 12 or more	35% or more	up to 8
Third	from 11 up to 14 years old	10 or more	30% or more	up to 12
Fourth	from 15 under 18 years old	9 and more	(not specified)	up to 12

Source: created by the authors

The first age category includes children aged 0-6 years and the graphic design of books has the following number of requirements. Books created for children who are just beginning the process of mastering reading skills belong to a special category of children's literature, where the visual component plays a decisive role in the perception and understanding of the plot. Illustrations in such publications not only complement the text, but also often serve as the main means of conveying the content, contributing to the formation of narrative thinking in children of early and preschool age. A significant part of these books is represented by the genres of lullabies, children's poems and songs, which

ensures the rhythm and melody of the perception of the text. Studies in neuropsychology have shown that when watching illustrated books in children under 5 years old, a greater number of brain zones associated with memory, recognition and the formation of new associations are activated than when listening only to text without pictures (Oliynyk, 2023).

The structure of such publications, as a rule, is characterised by a simplified plot, a minimum amount of text, the use of large font and understandable vocabulary (Glyuza & Tabakova, 2021). The format of the book also plays an important role: in order to activate the cognitive activity of the child, various interactive

forms are widely used – picture books, folding books, audiobooks, publications with lifting valves, elements of tactile or sensory influence, etc. (Fig. 1). These features contribute to the development of speech, fine motor skills, memory, imagination and the emotional sphere of the child.



Figure 1. An example of illustrative design of books for children of the first age category (0-5 years old)

Note: a – Clotilde Gubeli, illustrations for the book “Apchhi!”; b – Natalia Kudliak, illustrations for the book “ABC. Discover Ukraine!”; c – Simone Abel, illustrations for book “Look inside a farm”

Source: K. Daynes (2023), C. Gubeli (2024), K. Perkonos (2024)

Children aged 6-10 belong to the second category, and the graphic design of books for this group must meet special criteria. The overall visual design of a children’s book should combine brightness with compositional balance. To achieve an optimal aesthetic effect, designers should avoid oversaturation of colours or, conversely, the use of illustrations with insufficient contrast. Particular attention should be paid to the development of a visual image of the characters, in particular the main characters, which may contain traits that are correlated with the personal characteristics of the target readership.

Illustrative design for children of primary school age should comply with the principles of seriality and consistency, ensuring a logical unfolding of the plot. At the same time, it is recommended to avoid monotony in the depiction of scenes; the visual narrative should be built on the basis of key episodes with minimal repetition of graphic material (Fig. 2). For this age category, both the aesthetic characteristics of the illustrations and the functional convenience of the layout are equally important, which facilitates the reading process and more effective perception of the content.



Figure 2. An example of illustrative design of books for children of the second age category (6-10 years old)

Note: a – Rostyslav Popsky, illustrations for the book “Toreadors from Vasjukivka”; b – Yevheniia Gapchynska, illustrations for the book “Alice in Wonderland”; c, d – Natalia Gaida, illustrations for the book “36 and 6 cats”

Source: V. Nestayko (2004), H. Vdovychenko (2015), L. Carroll (2018)

The third age category includes children aged 11-14 years, and the design of books for this group requires adherence to a number of specific graphic requirements. According to research, the overall visual concept for adolescent readers should be based on atmospheric imagery, emotional expressiveness and symbolic depth, reflecting the growing cognitive and emotional needs of this age group (Polishchuk & Kalenyuk, 2023; Chelombitko, 2025). It is recommended to use a restrained colour palette, including monochrome or muted tones, with a clear emphasis on compositional structure and meaningful visual accents. Particular attention should be given to the depiction of key characters whose appearance can visually convey internal conflicts, psychological states, or personality traits relevant to young adolescents. Illustrations that portray emotions such as tension, hope or solidarity help teenagers recognise and articulate their own emotional experiences, supporting the development of emotional intelligence.

Illustrations in books for this age group are typically fragmented or episodic, appearing not on every page but primarily at turning points in the narrative or at moments with high semantic load (Novik & Zemtsova, 2021). In contemporary editions, visual elements may also include maps, symbolic motifs, diagrams or graphic metaphors that expand the interpretive possibilities of the text and guide the reader through complex storylines. At the same time, V. Oliynyk (2023) and Y. Song (2021) emphasised the importance of avoiding

excessive detail or overly decorative elements, as they can overwhelm the reader and interfere with comprehension of the central narrative. Instead, illustrations for this age category often appear as key compositions that emphasise major plot twists, psychological turning points or thematic accents. This approach contributes to deeper empathy, encourages analytical reading, and strengthens engagement with literature due to the interplay of visual and textual layers (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. An example of illustrative design of books for children of the third age category (11-14 years old)

Note: a – Chris Riddell, illustrations for book “Coraline”; b – Jim Kay, illustrations for the book “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s stone”; c – Brian Selznick, illustrations for the book “The invention of Hugo Cabret”; d – Nataliya Gaida, illustrations for the book “Fedko, an alien from the Internet”

Source: S. Hrydin (2011), J.K. Rowling (2016), B. Selznick (2023), N. Gaiman (2025)

The fourth age category includes children from 15 to 18 years old, and for book publications focused on this group, a number of specific requirements for graphic design have been defined. The illustrative design of fiction for readers aged 15-18 is distinguished by a high degree of stylistic reflection and mainly performs a decorative-symbolic or conceptual-supporting function. At this age, teenagers already have developed skills of abstract thinking, so visual elements are not intended to facilitate the understanding of the content, but on the contrary – stimulate interpretation, the formation of aesthetic preferences and critical perception of art.

The overall visual solution of such publications should be based on the principles of stylistic conciseness, genre correspondence and artistic integration with the text. Instead of traditional plot illustration, author’s graphic symbols, emotionally rich covers or decorative compositions are increasingly used, which

act as a visual metaphor of the text. The use of experimental techniques is allowed – collage, digital illustration, typography, hand graphics with elements of naïve, surreal or conceptual art. In the design of fiction books for older teenagers, it is advisable to avoid the literal reflection of characters or events; instead, it is recommended to focus on visual metaphors, colouristic symbols or images that correlate with the inner state of the characters (Fig. 4). The cover, as a rule, acts as the main carrier of the illustrative message, performing the function of semantic identification of the work (Khromchenko, 2023).



Figure 4. An example of illustrative design of books for children of the third age category (15-18 years old)

Note: a – Vladyslav Yerko, illustrations for the book “Notes of a Ukrainian self-traveler”; b – Rodrigo Corral, book cover design “The fault in our stars”; c – Tom Sanderson, book cover design “The book thief”; d – Kathleen Jennings, illustrations for book “Stolen heir”

Source: L. Kostenko (2010), J. Green (2014), M. Zusak (2016), H. Black (2025)

For authors who do not illustrate their own books, collaboration with an illustrator is a key stage of the creative process. Effective cooperation requires clarity of vision combined with openness to artistic interpretation. As noted by V. Oliylyk (2023) and D. Weiwei (2023), an illustrator enriches the narrative by adding depth, atmosphere, and emotional nuance to the text. Balancing written and visual components is particularly important in picture books, where illustrations often carry equal or even greater narrative weight than the text itself. Visual elements should expand the story rather than duplicate it, supporting comprehension and sustaining the young reader’s interest. A harmonious integration of text and imagery ensures that the book remains accessible, emotionally resonant, and aesthetically appealing. Illustrators play a fundamental

role in shaping this experience: they interpret characters, design settings, and convey the emotional tone of the story, guiding young readers through the fictional world. Their work must be not only artistically strong but also tailored to the cognitive and perceptual abilities of the target age group. Cooperation between author and illustrator forms the basis of a cohesive and successful children's book. This collaboration involves continuous communication, exchange of ideas, and several rounds of conceptual and visual refinement to ensure the illustrations fully reflect the author's intent (Pshinka, 2021). Examples from children's literature illustrate the power of such partnerships. H. Novik & P. Zemtsova (2021) confirmed that an illustrator's contribution profoundly influences the emotional and

cognitive reception of a children's book. Creating illustrations for children's books is a multi-stage artistic process that spans from conceptual sketches to the polished, final artwork. Children's literature employs a wide range of illustration styles, each of which introduces its own emotional tone, visual language, and artistic atmosphere. The most characteristic illustration styles used in modern children's publishing are presented below (Fig. 5). Figure 6 showed specific examples of books that use different illustration styles. These examples demonstrate how the chosen artistic style influences the perception of the plot and the emotional atmosphere of the book, emphasising the importance of the right visual solution in creating a coherent and engaging experience for readers.



Figure 5. Styles of children's illustration

Source: created by the authors

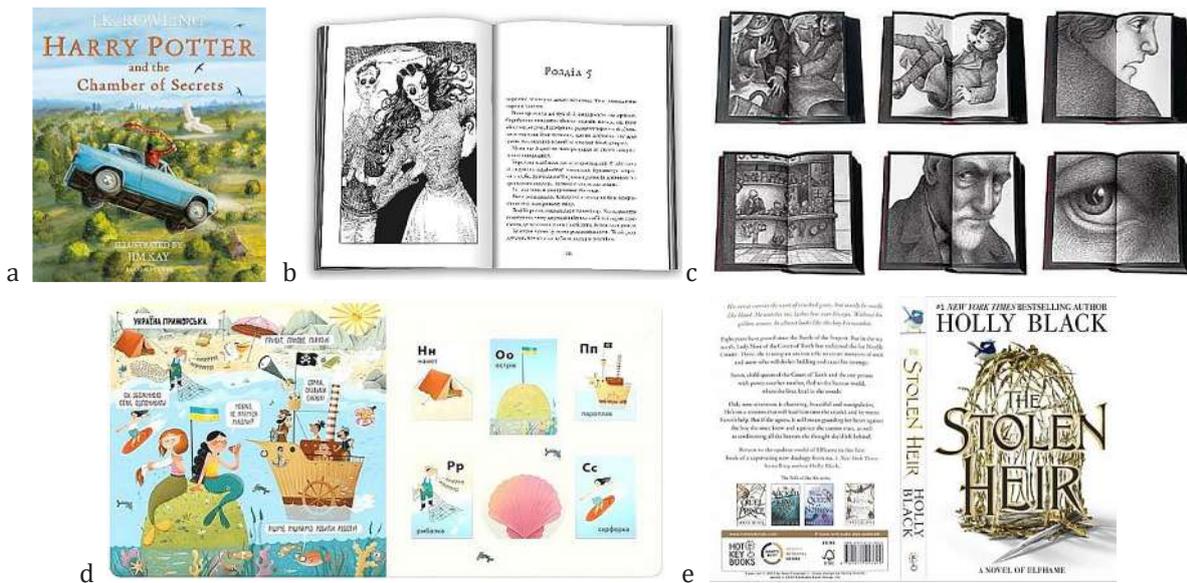


Figure 6. Examples of children's illustration styles

Note: a – realistic style: Jim Kay, illustration for “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s stone”; b – animated (cartoon) style: Chris Riddell, illustration for “Coraline”; c – whimsical style: Brian Selznick, illustrations for “The invention of Hugo Cabret”; d – minimalist style: Natalia Kudliak, illustrations for “ABC. Discover Ukraine!”; e – vintage style: Karina Granda, book cover for “Stolen Heir”

Source: J.K. Rowling (2016), H. Black (2021), K. Perkonos (2024), N. Gaiman (2025), B. Selznick (2023)

Choosing the right style of illustrations is critical to enhancing and complementing the narrative. Younger children often prefer bright, animated styles that promote emotional engagement with the story, while older readers tend to prefer more detailed and realistic images. Fantastic and unusual styles are best suited to fairy tales and adventure stories, while realistic illustrations are best used in the context of serious or informative stories. The author's personal vision and the message they want to convey to the reader play an important role in the choice of style, which emphasises the importance of close collaboration between the author and illustrator to achieve artistic integrity. The colour scheme of illustrations is one of the main elements of artistic expression in children's books, performing the functions of aesthetic, figurative, and communicative influence. Colour images should be rich and intense, with maximum transmission of all shades of the palette. An important aspect is the harmonious combination of colours, which creates visual integrity. The illustration should be clear and consistent in its variations for each copy of the book and throughout the entire print run. Preference should be given to natural colours, as they contribute to a more realistic perception of the surrounding world by children, which corresponds to their cognitive and emotional needs.

The conducted analysis demonstrated that illustration remains a fundamental structural and communicative element of contemporary children's books. As noted in the research of M.P. Glyuza & I.S. Tabakova (2021), illustrations organise visual information and ensure initial comprehension of narrative content, functioning as a core component of the communicative structure of the text. V.F. Chelombitko (2025) further emphasised that illustrational material performs an educational and developmental function, supporting emotional responsiveness, shaping aesthetic perception, and facilitating a child's engagement with the storyline.

The review of empirical and theoretical sources revealed that children's book illustration depends significantly on age-related perceptual characteristics. According to the study X. Sun (2023) investigates the influence of illustrations within literary texts on children's reading comprehension, highlighting the significant role that visual elements play in supporting understanding and engagement during the reading process. This correlated with broader tendencies outlined in R. Bezugla *et al.* (2025), where contemporary illustrators increasingly apply atmospheric, symbolically saturated, and emotionally expressive stylistic solutions in books for older children, emphasising psychological nuance and narrative depth. In a similar context, V. Blikhar (2024) highlighted how the emotional and cognitive development of children, shaped by family upbringing strategies, also impacts their engagement with external stimuli, such as illustrations, thus reinforcing the need for age-appropriate visual content in children's literature.

The research also identified the importance of structural organisation in children's book design. K.V. Khromchenko (2023) pointed out that modern printed editions rely on balanced visual composition, clarity of form and functional distribution of graphical elements. These considerations allow illustrations to guide semantic comprehension without dominating textual information. The importance of aligning artistic solutions with publishing standards and reader needs is demonstrated in the work of C.M. Eng *et al.* (2020), who examined the influence of streamlining book illustrations on the development of graphic culture. Their findings showed that coherence between stylistic choices, age specificity, and narrative content remains a determining factor in the visual design of children's books. O.P. Polishchuk & M.I. Kalenyuk (2023) further expanded this perspective by analysing modern illustrated formats used in Ukrainian publishing houses, emphasising innovation, hybrid formats, and diversity in visual communication. Meanwhile, V. Elysieieva & H. Myronova (2025) noted a shift toward thematic, culturally embedded, and psychologically attuned illustration practices in the contemporary development of children's literature. C.M. Eng's *et al.* (2020) study used eye-tracking to explore how extra illustrations in beginner reader storybooks might distract children and hinder learning. The results showed that additional illustrations led to more distractions, reduced reading comprehension, and lower attention to relevant content, suggesting that streamlined visual design can better support literacy development in young readers.

The study showed that illustrations in children's books are an important tool that contributes not only to the perception of the text, but also to the emotional and aesthetic development of children. The choice of illustration style depends on the age characteristics of readers and narrative requirements, and is also important for attracting attention and maintaining interest in the book. A variety of approaches to the use of illustrations, particularly in the context of age groups, allows for the creation of books that best meet the needs of young readers.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the conducted analysis of scientific, theoretical and practical sources, it was revealed that illustrations play a decisive role in shaping children's reading culture and significantly influence their emotional, cognitive and aesthetic development. The research findings demonstrated that illustrations do not merely accompany the text but often serve as an interpretative tool that helps young readers grasp plot dynamics, character traits and emotional nuances. Visual imagery was shown to stimulate imagination, support the development of critical thinking, and strengthen the reader's engagement with the narrative. Based on the analysis, four age categories were identified, each with

its own specific requirements for illustrations. The study showed that effective illustration design should correspond to the age-related perceptual characteristics of children, which allows for an increase in the level of emotional and cognitive engagement with the text. Based on the results of the analysis, recommendations were provided for working with each of these categories, taking into account their individual needs and characteristics of visual information perception. For younger readers, simplified forms, bright colour palettes and clear compositions are essential, while older children respond better to stylistically complex, conceptually rich and emotionally expressive visual solutions. The study identified that a balanced combination of artistic, semantic and educational components ensures the creation of a holistic visual-textual environment. This environment supports not only reading

comprehension but also emotional intelligence and the child's ability to interpret visual messages. Prospects for further research include the study of the impact of digital technologies on the perception of illustrative content, the development of criteria for assessing illustration quality in children's literature, and the analysis of adaptive and interactive formats that meet the evolving needs of modern young readers.

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Особливості ілюстрування книг для дітей різних вікових груп

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Анотація. В умовах інтенсивного розвитку цифрових медіа та зміни візуальної культури особливої ваги набуває створення якісного, естетично цілісного і психологічно обґрунтованого ілюстративного супроводу, здатного підтримувати увагу, сприяти розвитку образного мислення та формувати візуальну грамотність дітей різного віку. Мета роботи полягала у виявленні стилістичних, композиційних і технологічних особливостей оформлення дитячої книги з урахуванням вікових особливостей читача. Для досягнення цієї мети використано візуально-аналітичний, порівняльно-типологічний та системно-аналітичний методи. У статті досліджено основні особливості ілюстрування книг для дітей різного віку. Обґрунтовано, що ілюстрування книг суттєво впливає на формування світогляду майбутнього покоління, оскільки ілюстрація часто є першим візуальним досвідом дитини, а від її якості й змісту залежить сприйняття навколишнього світу. Проаналізовано стилі ілюстрування, їхній вплив на зміст і розміщення тексту для кожної вікової групи; окрему увагу приділено особливостям співпраці ілюстраторів і редакторів для формування цілісного образу дитячої книги. Висвітлено основні етапи роботи над ілюструванням, а також основні принципи та значення художнього оформлення. Досліджено актуальність удосконалення ілюстративного супроводу дитячих книг як важливого чинника формування естетичного уявлення, креативного мислення та читацької культури у дітей різного віку. Особливу увагу приділено урахуванню психологічних і когнітивних особливостей дитячого сприйняття як ключового завдання для ілюстраторів, дизайнерів і редакторів, які працюють у сфері дитячого книговидання. Практична цінність дослідження полягала у розробці методичних рекомендацій для ілюстраторів, дизайнерів і видавців щодо оптимізації графічного оформлення дитячих видань відповідно до вікової структури читацької аудиторії

Ключові слова: візуальне оповідання; наративні образи; когнітивний розвиток; художні методи; зображальний аналіз; залучення читача; візуальна семіотика