



# Talking to Kids about Jimi & Isaac Books

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Howdy. My name is Phil Rink and I write Jimi & Isaac books. Please take a card and hand the rest around until everyone has one. We'll talk about the cards later, so keep them out.

I'm going to talk to you today about communication and story-telling.

The first way that human beings told each other what we wanted and how we felt was using art. We painted pictures and danced, and we whistled and sang at each other to try and get our point across. Then we invented words. Soon after that we started putting the words together in predictable ways to tell each other stories. The stories became the structure of our culture, how we live together and understand each other.

The way that individuals interact is very complicated, way too complicated to ever fully explain. We will never be able to fully understand what someone else thinks or believes. So we make up simple stories about small parts of human behavior, then we talk about the stories to help us become better people.

How many of you are team Nike? Adidas? Reebok? Sketchers? You have all picked a shoe company, and now that you've picked you'll probably buy those same shoes for most of your lives. But, there's no way that you actually know what you're talking about. You haven't done the work and experimentation required to actually know anything about what shoes are best and why. Instead, you've heard and believed stories about how Nike shoes make you a better basketball player, or how Adidas shoes make you faster. Most of those stories aren't true.

When I'm not writing books I'm an scientist and an engineer, I make stuff and figure out how stuff works.

Scientists and engineers study nature, but most of the time nature is too messy and complicated to talk about. Scientists invented a whole new language and story structure called math so we can talk about materials and forces as accurately as possible. We use math to create simplified stories about nature called models, then we talk about the models.

One of the things I invented is a video game to cure cancer and fight disease. You become your body to rebuild broken bones or fight infection. You search out and kill cancer cells. I believe that if the storytelling inside the video game is strong enough you can actually change the way the very basic parts of your body respond. That's good if you're sick and trying to fight cancer.

But that's why I hate video games. Hate. HATE. When you play a sport and you score a goal or made a great play your body releases endorphins and other chemicals that make you feel good about what you've done. When you play video game soccer or football the game does such a good job at simulating the experience – it tells the story so well – that your body releases the same chemicals and you feel like you've already played, but really you haven't done anything. We want you to go out in the world and slay dragons, not sit on the couch and pretend to slay pretend dragons.

Society is telling you stories all the time. Most of you already have favorite shoes, or favorite cars, or favorite political ideas because you've heard and believed stories, not because you've done the research and decided for yourselves.

You need to recognize that you are already telling stories about yourself. Nobody really knows you, but they know how you dress, talk, behave and if you follow through on your promises.

When a cat walks towards you, he tells a story. If his tail is up and he's looking you straight in the eye, he's saying he's happy to see you and he'd like some food. However, when a dog sees that same cat, he uses dog language to hear the story. When a dog walks straight towards you with his tail up and his eyes fixed on you, he's going to bite. On the other hand, when a dog walks with his tail down and his gaze averted, he's being friendly. The cat thinks he's stalking a mouse.

A good story builds energy and a bad story creates despair. A good story challenges you and changes you. A bad story tells you how to feel, instead of making you learn how you feel. A bad story fills some time, keeping you from doing something better. Some people say “Kills Time,” not fills time.

You are all in the middle. You're in-between. You're done being children, but you have a few years before you have to be adults. 100 years ago, and forever before that, you'd be expected to be pulling your own weight by now, and making your own way in the world within the next two or three years. Now we want you to stay in school for almost ten more years. That's very different than what we expected from anyone else ever. You and I have the same bodies and the same brains as prehistoric people. But our lives are completely different. The more we participate in creating ourselves the happier we will be with the result.

Your bodies and your minds are changing quickly and radically. In just a few years you'll be a very different person, inside and out. It's important for you to spend those years doing all the different things you need to do to find out who you are. You need to do art, and make music, and play sports. You need to build things and fix things and help people. You need to challenge your mind and your character so that you learn what you believe and why you believe it. You need to seek out and understand different viewpoints so you can develop your own and have empathy for others.

The world is changing faster than anyone understands. My grandfathers, and pretty much everyone in my family before then, were farmers. My Dad grew up as a farmer, but he had such bad allergies that he had to leave the farm and join the army. After the army he went to college and became an engineer. In his first job out of school he worked on nuclear rocket engines. Really. Later on he was one of the first people in the world to burn something with a laser that he'd built. His life was totally different than anyone in our family ever. My life is just as different from his, and my kids will live lives that don't resemble mine. You probably won't do what your parents do for a living, and your lives will be crazy different than anything your grandparents or great-grandparents ever knew. However, you and I have the same bodies and the same brains as the people in ancient history. The more we participate in creating ourselves the happier we will be with the result. We are all working this out as we go along.

That's why we want you to read good books. To hear good stories. To learn how to tell your own stories effectively. To become yourselves. My books aren't illustrated. I've never liked the pictures in books - the pictures in my head are better. I want you to see yourselves and your friends when you read, not somebody else in a far-off distant world.

My books are about Jimi and Isaac, and about the things that Jimi and Isaac do. Jimi is named after Jimi Hendrix. Jimi Hendrix was not the first guitarist, not by a long shot. but he did things with a guitar that nobody had ever done. Fifty years ago, Jimi changed guitar playing forever. Isaac is named after Isaac Newton. 400 years ago Isaac Newton invented the math called Calculus that we use to describe gravity and the rest of nature.

Jimi & Isaac books are different from other books. They are short. They have short sentences, short paragraphs, and short chapters. They fit my short attention span. They move quickly. Also, Jimi & Isaac books are full of information. You'll have to think when you read the books. School Soccer is about the details of soccer and starting middle school, Keystone Species is about boating and ecology and activism, Mars Mission and Solar Powered are about inventing and science and engineering and problem solving and business, and Brain Injury is about dealing with tragedy. All five books follow each other, starting with the week before middle school starts and ending the week before high school starts, but you can read them in any order.

So, lets talk about story. A story always has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning is where you set the scene and introduce your main character. You want everyone to care about your main character. At the end of the beginning, you give your character a problem to solve. The worse you treat your main character, the more interesting the story. There are lots of bad problems. In the middle of the story, the main character tries to solve the problem. At the end, the problem is solved, usually. Sometimes the problem is resolved, which is a different thing. Usually the ending is the

same as the beginning, but different. If the story starts with breakfast in a house, then the house is destroyed by a tornado, maybe the story ends with breakfast in the new house.

Stories are all built the same way because the standard structure works. Telling a lie is the best way to tell a truth. People aren't that different and they respond to the standard story structure. Even if the storyteller leaves parts out, your mind will fill them in.

If you want to read more, there are very good books out there about building stories. Or, you can watch movies. Pixar really understands story. Watch the “Making of...” segment on the “Cars” DVD to see how they figured it out. It's brilliant. A really well built book, or movie, has layers of stories building on and mixing with each other. Each ending is another beginning.



The business cards I gave you all have a front and a back. On the front is my name and email address, which you can use if you want to tell me about something cool, and our website and Facebook page where you can read about our books and what people say about our books. I put interesting language and art and science and engineering and storytelling stuff on the Facebook page. You can post stuff there, too, if you find something that fits.

On the back of the business card is the secret to life. It's how to get stuff done. It's really simple. You think about something, and then you do something, then you think about what you did and what you need to do, then you do something. It never stops. The most important thing, thought, is that you pay attention while you're thinking about and doing stuff. Most people forget that part.

Thinking isn't enough. Doing isn't enough. You need to do both, and constantly check to see that you're thinking and doing effectively. It's important to notice two things about this process: you're never done, and you're never completely right.

Everything that you do is at least a little messed up. You can always do better. Everything that other people do is at least a little messed up, too. Nothing is perfect. Part of the “Think” step is deciding when what you've got is enough, and it's time to move on.

When I write, I use this process to build the books: I think about what kind of book I want to write, what the story will be, and what each character is going to do. Then I map out the chapters. Each morning I write for an hour or three until I run out of ideas. I spend the rest of the day figuring out what to do next. The following morning I start by fixing what I wrote the day before, then typing away at the new stuff. Then I think about it some more. Usually the story changes while I'm writing and I have stop writing while I re-plan the rest of the book, or go back and re-write earlier parts to get back on track. I use the “Think/Do/Pay Attention” process all the time.

Finally, we'll have a discussion. Once I asked a sixth grade class if stories needed happy endings. One girl said no. “Romeo and Juliet” she said, when I asked her for an example. “Why did Shakespeare do that?” I asked. “So they'd die perfect,” she said. Sixth grade. Perfect, indeed.

Phil Rink is a [Professional Engineer and Inventor](#), and he writes [Jimi & Isaac Books](#) for Kids