

Early Literacy – Building Pre-Reading Skills with your Toddler

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The Motivation to Read

Building early literacy skills does *not* mean teaching your toddler to read a book. Formal instruction like drilling on phonics or using flashcards is not developmentally appropriate at this age, and may be counter-productive, if your child comes to think of reading as a difficult and burdensome task.

Early literacy should be focused on creating an environment where *books are so cool and the ability to read is so amazing* that your child just can't wait to learn how. Here are some things we can do:

- Model how powerful reading is. Point out that words are all around us and help us get what we want. If we want to make cookies, we can read a recipe. If we want to see the bears at the zoo, we can use the map and the signs to help us find them. If we want milk at a restaurant, we can look on the menu to see if they have it. If we have a question or something we want to learn, we look it up in a book or online and learn about it by reading.
- Model reading as something you do for pleasure. Whether you read books, magazines, newspapers, Facebook, or blogs on your tablet, let your child know how much you enjoy it.
- When you read to your child, make it fun! Choose books you will enjoy reading.
- Literacy is a social process, which happens in relationships with family, caretakers and teachers. There's a wonderful connection that happens you snuggle up with a book, give your child your full attention, and enjoy sharing an experience together.

When and where to read

Don't just save books for in the bedroom at bedtime. Have them scattered around the house, in the car, the diaper bag and so on. Share books every day – at breakfast, naptime, the grocery store, the doctor's office, when you arrive at a class or meeting early... show that we can always enjoy a book!

It's OK to read for just a few minutes at a time – don't worry if they may flip through several books quickly or glance at one, then want to run off to play. On the other hand, if they want to read a book slowly, lingering over one page, going back to it over and over, don't feel like you need to rush them.

Developmental Stages

12 – 18 months: can hold or carry books, look at board books independently, points to pictures in the book, may gaze at one book for a long time, or may switch between books quickly

18 – 24 months: may carry a favorite book around; hold books and pretend to read; may want you to read the same book over and over (when you do, your child may say some of the words with you)

2 – 3 years: can learn to turn pages in a regular book, names objects in pictures, may recite parts of books from memory, starts to relate what they're reading about in books to their life experiences

3 – 4 years: understand that words on a page have meaning, begin to recognize letters, may know some words, enjoy longer stories, can guess what might happen next, like to discuss stories

How to read

- Let them turn the pages – don't stress if they miss a page.
- Run your finger along the words as you read.
- Define new words, explain new ideas.
- If a book has no words make up your own! Tell a story based on the pictures.

- Talk about the pictures, point out familiar things (“he has a toy train just like you do”)
- Use different voices for characters; read at different speeds (some slow and gentle, others fast and rollicking); play up the emotional tone – are characters happy? Scared? Silly? Angry?
- Ask questions about what’s happening in the story, ask how characters are feeling.
- Think of a book as a conversation starter. Talk about the book and how it connects to them.
- It’s OK if toddlers wander around while you read – they can still listen while moving.

What kind of books do kids love?

Young Toddlers (12 – 24 months): choose sturdy board books with only a few words on each page. Look for simple rhymes and predictable text (e.g. a repeating phrase that appears throughout). Look for simple pictures that match the text. They like books about things they see and do in their day-to-day lives, like eating lunch or going to the park, more than fantasy or books about exotic experiences.

Toddlers (2 – 3 years): Choose books that tell simple stories. Pay attention to what your child is passionate about - animals, trains, dinosaurs – they’ll love books about that. Look for non-fiction on topics like shapes, numbers, letters. Choose books with rhythm, rhyme, and repetition. Lift the flaps.

Preschoolers (3 – 5 years): Children are able to enjoy longer stories, and stories about things outside their daily experience. You can choose non-fiction books about simple ideas like telling time, counting, opposites, and also about anything they’re excited about – planets, sports, kittens...

Aim for a mix of familiar books and fresh ones – kids love to hear the same book over and over - the familiar is comforting and repetition helps them learn. New books introduce new ideas and new things to fall in love with. At any reading session, offer multiple books and let them choose.

Other ways to help them learn about reading and writing

- Make books together – make photo albums, or cut pictures out of magazines. For older kids, they can dictate a story – they tell it, you write it out, then they can illustrate the pages.
- Practice writing, drawing, painting, writing with a stick in the sand or the mud. Make letters with play dough or pipe cleaners. Have them work with puzzles made of letter shapes. Look for apps for your touch screen device (tablet or phone) that let them practice tracing letters.
- Act out stories that you have read, or do puppet shows. Tell the story as written, or imagine what would come next, or what other adventure characters could have.
- Sing songs and play rhyming games – these slow language down so it’s easier to understand, and are easy to memorize. Later, try memorizing a story and telling it over and over.
- When they ask you a question, show how you would look up the answer.
- Visit the library often. Make it a special time in your week’s schedule.
- Take them to storytime at the library or bookstores. Learn more here:

www.peps.org/ParentResources/by-topic/early-learning/why-story-time-rocks

Resources:

Collection of fabulous articles on building literacy skills at www.zerotothree.org/child-development/early-language-literacy/tips-tools-early-lit-and-lang.html

King County library has a lyrics to songs AND videos of librarians singing them: <https://kcls.org/content/>

Brooklyn Public Library’s site includes great literacy tips, book recommendations, and lyrics for lots of children’s songs: www.bklynpubliclibrary.org/first-5-years