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How To Read To Your Child

Children need to be read to from infancy through elementary school. Reading to your child on a daily basis improves your child's comprehension development, vocabulary expansion, and exposure to the world. Following are suggestions of how to read to your child and some activities to assist your child in developing thinking skills.

Start reading to your child, as early as birth or even before. As a newborn you can read your child books intended for young children, and you can also read aloud anything you are reading: the newspaper, a textbook, a piece of fiction... A newborn's brain develops at such a fast pace that hearing the language of anything you are reading can aid their development. Risley & Hart, in their 1995 book Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Lives of American Children, compared the early language environments of children from 7-9 months until 3 years, and then correlated language exposure to achievement test scores in 3rd grade. Children who heard the greatest amount of language when they were young had the highest achievement test scores, while children who heard the least amount of language had the lowest achievement test scores.

Continue reading with your child into toddlerhood. Toddler aged children love the repetition of books. Favorites include Goodnight Moon by Margaret Wise Brown, The Little Engine That Could, Brown Bear, Brown Bear by Bill Martin, Jr. A note about using books with toddlers: do not underestimate a toddler and their ability to handle or stick with a story.

Not all toddlers require board books but few board books provide great stories. Left to their own devices you may want to stick with sturdy books, but for reading time with your child branch out past board books to stories.

With a toddler (and older children) you have many options for story time. Before you begin a story you can read to the child and have your child guess (predict) what the story may be about. You can go on a book walk – look at the pictures in the book before you actually read the book to get an idea about the story. If the book is obviously about a topic (Brown Bear is about animals) you can discuss the topic with your child beforehand. Ask your child if they remember when they went to the zoo, park, pet store... to see animals. Talking about a topic ahead of time enables the child to remember their prior knowledge on the topic.

As you are reading the story you may want your child to listen as you read or you may encourage your child to participate (pointing to a picture, making an animal noise while reading Brown Bear). Think as you read about the vocabulary in the book and if a word or an expression requires an explanation; give it. Exposing your child to vocabulary outside what they use everyday is critical for their vocabulary development.

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How To Read To Your Child Continued...

After the story you can ask your child about their favorite part. It isn't critical that you do all of the above items with every book. Reading with your child should be a special, enjoyable time.

With a pre-school aged child you can do the same as with a toddler aged child. A pre-school aged child will likely want to re-read the same book occasionally, but will also enjoy exposure to new books. Your child may even venture into the chapter book arena. As your child learns to read and is working on reading phonetic books, continue reading to your child. You are likely to spend time nightly listening to your child read. This is not a time to neglect reading to your child. You continue to set an example on how to read: reading fluently so your child hears proficient reading. Read aloud books are typically several reading levels above a child's reading ability.

An important component of reading aloud to your child is keeping their interest. What is your child interested in reading? They may be interested in a topic that doesn't hold high interest for you. Consider reading a book on that topic to your child and then picking a book that has high interest for both of you. This is a wonderful age to introduce chapter books and higher quality pieces of literature. Think about what books you consider classics: Winnie the Pooh, Laura Ingalls Wilder books, etc. No matter the book you choose, continue reading to the child, perhaps a few chapters a night. Reading chapter books at this age helps your child increase their attention span (entire chapter books are not typically read in one sitting) and it gives your child the opportunity to follow the development of characters.

As your child enters elementary age, although they are likely able to read chapter books on their own, you may want to introduce your child to a favorite author or to a series. Favorites include:

- Laura Ingalls Wilder Series
- C.S. Lewis' The Chronicles of Narnia
- Harry Potter books by J.K. Rowling
- Winnie the Pooh by A.A. Milne
- Magic Tree House Series by Mary Pope Osborne
- Madeline L'Engle books
- Judy Blume books
- Sarah, Plain and Tall by Patricia MacLachlan
- Roald Dahl books

The elementary aged child can really enjoy and appreciate fables and folklore. This aged child enjoys stories about heroes (historical figures). As you read fables and folklore you can introduce the child to not only different cultures, but also to morals. Think about introducing your child to characters such as Paul Bunyan and Babe. You are not only exposing your child to a heroic figure, but also to a time and place that may not be familiar. Fables and folklore (think Aesop's fables) are typically short, easy to read stories that help children learn moral lessons.



Tips From Teachers:

Looking for ways to read to your child that are different and interesting? Consider a few of these ideas:

- For elementary school aged children and up, consider a parent/child book group. Get a small group (3 – 4 works fine) of parent/child combinations that would like to read the same book. Then plan to meet to have a book discussion.
- After reading a book (chapter or otherwise) become one of the characters in the book. Invite your child to ask the character questions.
- Reading to more than one child? Invite your children to re-enact the story. This could become very involved with props, but can be very quick and simple after the story is read.
- Fact Vs. Opinion: After reading a story tell your child a statement. Ask if the statement is fact or opinion. A fact is something you can prove, an opinion is what you think or feel. Give your child the chance to tell you a statement.
- Put a character on trial. Say you read a story such as Little Red Riding Hood, put the wolf on trial for the crime (s) he committed. Your child can play one of the roles – attorney, judge, jury, Wolf, Red Riding Hood...
- Read two versions of the same story (Little Red Riding Hood, Three Little Pigs...) and have your child compare the similarities and highlight the differences. This is one of many times when having a library card comes in handy. You can find several versions of the same book without having to make a purchase.
- Many libraries offer summer reading programs where children are encouraged to read a number of books during the summer.
- Invite your child to identify the beginning, middle and end of the story. For an older child, you can write down story events and have your child put them in the correct order.
- Author Study: Gather books by one author and see if you and your child can identify commonalities of the author. Favorite authors include: Eric Carle, Jan Brett, Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, Roald Dahl.
- Genre Study: Similar to the author study, in a genre study you take particular types of books by many different authors. Genres include: fiction, non-fiction, fantasy, realistic fiction, historical fiction, biography, informational
- Book Award: After reading a book aloud to your child determine whether a book is worthy of a book award. Does the book have particularly outstanding artwork, use of vocabulary, character development? You and your child can make an award for any aspect of a book. See what kind of awards you can develop (Best Sense of Humor Award, Worst Grammar Award, Outstanding story location...)

